



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

DEC 07 2012

The Honorable Jon Tester
United States Senate
724 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington D.C. 20510-2604

Dear Senator Tester:

Thank you for your letter of November 19, 2012, cosigned by your colleagues, regarding the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) and the updated nutrition requirements in the National School Lunch Program. Your ongoing support of our goal to facilitate the health of American youth is greatly appreciated. Please know that the Department of Agriculture (USDA) is carefully monitoring the implementation of the new requirements to ensure that the updated standards are workable and contain enough flexibility for local schools and school districts.

The HHFKA and new standards are essential to ensure young people get the nourishment they need to support their academic performance and overall well-being. Additionally, these standards are just one part of a comprehensive effort taking place across the Federal government to address childhood obesity—a national epidemic with significant health and economic consequences for our country. Nearly one in three children are at increased risk for preventable diseases like diabetes and heart disease due to being overweight or obese. The costs for treating these preventable diseases have been estimated at roughly \$190 billion per year. If left unaddressed, health experts tell us that our current generation of children may well have a shorter lifespan than their parents. These are not mere statistics; they are real people that we know and see every day.

To be sure, childhood obesity cannot be addressed by changes to school meals alone. The primary responsibility for instilling healthy eating habits in America's kids will always lie with parents, communities, and children themselves. But when spending taxpayer dollars on school meals, we have a responsibility to ensure we are supporting those efforts. And we know that these meals are an important part of the solution, not just because they reach so many children every school day, but also because we know they can work. In fact, recent research by the esteemed Cochrane Collaboration has shown that school-based nutrition reforms – including improvements to school food – can help reduce levels of obesity.

As directed by Congress under the HHFKA, USDA relied on the recommendations of experts like the Institute of Medicine—a gold standard for scientific analysis—as the basis for our standards. The result was updated, science-based standards, in which the portions of school meals are “right-sized” to reflect the age and dietary needs of the students served and the appropriate balance between food groups.

These new school meals offer twice as many fruits and vegetables as the previous ones, and servings of whole grains have been increased substantially. They are designed to ensure that children have the energy they need to learn in class and be physically active, while reducing their risk for serious chronic diseases.

Certainly, these reforms will take time to yield results and require collaboration if they are to be successful. As a part of our ongoing implementation plan, the Department has been listening to parents, schools, State agencies, and other interested parties. We always anticipated that some modifications and other allowances would be required for changes of this size and scope. USDA has asked for, and States and schools have provided us with, valuable feedback. As a result, you should be pleased to know that we have recently moved to allow for additional flexibility in meeting some of the new standards.

For example, the top operational challenge that States and schools have reported is in serving meals that fit within the weekly minimum and maximum serving ranges for the grains and meat/meat alternate portions of the standards. To help schools make a successful transition to the new requirements, we have provided additional flexibility in meeting the requirements for these components. If a school is meeting just the minimum serving requirements for these two food groups, they will be considered in compliance with that portion of the standards, regardless of whether they have exceeded the maximum. This flexibility is being provided to allow more time for the development of products that fit within the new standards while granting schools additional weekly menu planning options to help ensure that children receive a wholesome, nutritious meal every day of the week.

These actions are by no means exhaustive. Implementation is a process that takes time, and as the school year progresses we will continue listening and providing education, technical assistance, and flexibilities where appropriate. Fortunately, there are a number of options currently available to deal with potential additional challenges, such as feeding very active students. Parents, individual students and/or sports teams can supplement the taxpayer-subsidized meals with items provided from home or other sources. And students are always permitted to purchase as much additional food a la carte as they want. Schools can also make larger portions of fruits and vegetables (or even milk) available at lunch and structure afterschool snack and supper programs to provide additional foods for those who need them. Many schools have previously found success with parent or school-run booster clubs providing afterschool snacks and may opt to continue or even expand this practice.

I appreciate your specific questions about the nutritional needs of individual children. It is important to point out that the new school meals are designed to meet only a portion of a child's nutritional needs over the course of the school day. This should come as no surprise – students never have and never will get all of their daily dietary needs from a single meal. School breakfasts and lunches are designed to meet roughly one-fourth and one-third, respectively, of the daily calorie needs of school children.

Additionally, the age and grade groupings of the school meals programs have always been designed to reflect the common practice of school systems (K-5, 6-8, 9-12). While not every

school is set up this way, the program provides flexibility for alternate grade groupings while avoiding the significant operational difficulties that would result if schools were required to run thirteen different serving lines in the cafeteria for children grades K-12. Such a requirement would be unique in the history of the meals programs and likely cause schools to incur substantial additional costs.

USDA is focused on minimizing additional costs and is acutely aware of the financial challenges that many schools face in putting together healthy school meals on a budget. That is why more than \$3 billion in new resources was provided through the HHFKA to support an additional 6-cent per lunch reimbursement. In addition, \$50 million was also provided by the HHFKA for each of fiscal years 2012 and 2013 for USDA and States to offer technical assistance in support of the new requirements. Finally, the HHFKA sets commonsense business standards that complement the Federal resources included in the Act in order to ensure that enough revenue is being brought in to cover the cost of producing healthy school meals. When taken together, these additional resources should provide enough revenue for schools to meet the new meal requirements.

Thank you again for your interest in USDA's efforts to improve the school meal programs. For more information on the updated standards and the work USDA is doing to help States, schools, parents and children, I encourage you to visit our Web site on the new standards at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Healthierschoolday/default.htm>. We appreciate you taking the time to share your concerns with us.

Please have your staff contact Brian Baenig, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, at (202) 720-7095 if you have any questions. A similar letter is being sent to your colleagues.

Sincerely,



Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary