

New NSLP Guidelines: Challenges and Opportunities for Nutrition Education Practitioners and Researchers

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ABSTRACT

The recent revisions of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) requirements are designed to align with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The introduction and implementation of the new NSLP has been received with positive and negative reactions from school food professionals, students, parents, and teachers. To promote student health, this is an important time for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers to implement and evaluate strategies to support the new NSLP guidelines. The purpose of this viewpoint was to outline the new NSLP guidelines and discuss challenges and opportunities for implementation, strategies for practice, and future research questions.

Key Words: National School Lunch Program, nutrition standards, schools (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2013;45:683-689.)

INTRODUCTION

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) established the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in 1946.¹ The NSLP is a federally funded program that currently serves more than 30 million students each day in over 100,000 schools in the US.¹ Quality nutrition in the NSLP program is important given that NSLP participants consume approximately 40% of their actual caloric intake at lunch, which is higher than non-NSLP participants.² In 2010, the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act³ required updating the meal patterns and nutrition standards for the NSLP and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). The new guidelines align with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA)⁴ to "... meet the nutrition needs of school children" and "enhance the diet and health of school children, and help mitigate the childhood obesity trend."⁵ New meal standards were re-

quired to be implemented beginning July 1, 2012 and Fall, 2012 marked the beginning of implementation for the majority of the components of the new NSLP guidelines across the US.⁶ The purposes of this report were first to describe opportunities and challenges while reviewing the new NSLP standards, and then to discuss suggestions for implementation, promotion of the standards in practice, and future research and evaluation. Implementation of the SBP guidelines will occur over 2 years beginning during the 2013–2014 school year. The NSLP guidelines and their implementation are the focus of this report.

Since the implementation of the new NSLP guidelines, there have been many different reactions expressed by policy makers, school foodservice personnel, parents, students, and others across the country. Iowa Congressman Steve King stated that he planned to repeal the new standards: "They have found a way to invade the lunch tray of the

youngest members of our society, what's next? The new regulations are a one-size-fits-all encroachment of our liberties."⁷ Other states and school districts have demonstrated support for the changes, acknowledging that they may ultimately benefit students and may potentially help in curbing the obesity epidemic. The USDA began to collect feedback from key stakeholders about the new guidelines and have since revised specific components accordingly.⁸ This is a critical time for nutrition education professionals, researchers, and policy makers to assist with the implementation, measurement, and evaluation of such a broad-reaching policy.

This viewpoint outlines the specific standards and strategies for the new NSLP guidelines, along with recommendations for overcoming challenges found in implementation, promotion of the standards in practice, and future research and evaluation.

National School Lunch Program Standards

The Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA regularly updates regulations and policy memos, and provides technical assistance and guidance materials about the new NSLP guidelines, including specific nutrient requirements.⁹ Below, the specific standards implemented during the 2012–2013

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2013.06.004>

academic year are summarized by food group,⁶ with successes and challenges in implementation highlighted.

Approaches to Menu Planning and Serving

School food authorities (SFAs) are responsible for administering school feeding programs.¹⁰ School food authorities must serve meals that offer 5 meal components daily, including fruits, vegetables, grains, meat/meat alternate, and milk. The serving sizes within the 5 meal components are planned based on kindergarten through 5, 6–8, and 9–12 age/grade groups. There is some overlap of nutrient requirements within the kindergarten through 8 age/grade groups that offers ease in menu planning for schools with combined age/grade levels. In addition, offer vs serve (OVS) now allows students to decline 2 food items, but students must choose ½ cup fruit or vegetable (FV) or ¼ cup fruit and ¼ cup vegetable. Offer vs serve is mandatory for high schools and elective for elementary and middle schools. Offer vs serve provides flexibility for students to choose among preferred meal components and has the potential to reduce food waste.

Calories

School food authorities are required to formulate meals with minimum and maximum ranges of calories based on age group, whereas previously only minimum calories were required. Reducing calories affects virtually every other area of the new requirements. Minimum serving sizes for the grains and meat/meat alternate components were reduced, whereas the FV components increased, and the milk component remained the same. Some SFAs are finding that implementing the calorie component has not changed their meals drastically, whereas other SFAs find the decrease challenging.¹¹ For example, this change could be more noticeable for SFAs that were serving well above the minimum nutrient requirement specified in the previous standards. Like other food components in the new requirements, the calorie require-

ments align with the 2010 DGA⁴ and are designed to limit overconsumption. The new requirements were specifically designed to promote quality nutrients and limit excess calories. Promoting energy balance during lunch is a way to reduce childhood obesity.^{12,13}

For students accustomed to eating larger portions, however, this could be a marked shift.¹¹ The calorie requirements may pose potential challenges for students with higher energy needs. Students may reach energy needs with nutrient-dense options such as salad bars or second servings of FVs without additional lunch charge.¹¹ Students with freedom to travel off campus during the lunch hour may choose to eat lunch at other food outlets, potentially of lower nutrient quality. Students with access to vending machines or school stores may also choose to supplement or substitute school lunch with more energy-dense foods. If outside foods and competitive foods are standard alternates or additions to lunch, students using free or reduced may feel stigmatized owing to affordability of other foods.

Fruits and Vegetables

According to the new requirements, FVs are offered as 2 separate meal components, instead of the previous requirement to offer a fruit *or* vegetable. The previous requirements only mandated SFAs to offer a fruit *or* vegetable, with no guidance on the type of vegetable or stipulation that a student had to be served a fruit or vegetable. The goal of this new guideline is to increase exposure to and availability of a variety of FVs, currently addressing a major dietary shortfall as exemplified by the low percentage of children and adolescents meeting recommendations for daily FV consumption.¹⁴

The new requirements mandate that students must select at least a ½ cup of fruit *or* vegetable or a combination of ¼ cup fruit and ¼ cup vegetable under OVS. This OVS caveat is designed to reduce food waste and costs.⁵ The FV guidelines do not mandate that students select both FVs, which would be more optimal for meeting 2010 DGA recommendations,⁴ but could potentially increase food waste.

School food authorities are required to increase the variety of vegetables served during a week period, with weekly requirements for dark green, red/orange, beans/peas (legumes), starches, and other vegetables, as defined in the 2010 DGA,⁴ whereas previously there was no requirement for the type of vegetables served. The requirement has potential to increase the variety of vegetables to which students are exposed, although foodservice personnel may need training and additional equipment to improve cooking preparation knowledge, skills, and capacity to prepare recipes that are appealing to children, while aligning with calorie limits. The vegetable requirement also continues to allow tomato sauce to be counted as a vegetable on pizza, and french fries to be served in limited amounts per week.

The new guidelines allow up to half of the fruit requirement to be met with 100% fruit juice, even though it provides more calories than whole fruit and is not nutritionally equivalent. One financial issue that is raised is the waste that occurs because increased availability of FVs does not necessarily equate with consumption, especially if students do not demonstrate a preference for FVs.¹⁵ Although language to promote sourcing for local FVs in schools is included in the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act,³ the new guidelines may limit local sources because of the potential added costs of offering both FVs and, depending on location, a lack of variety of local produce to meet the variety standards. Overall, the new guidelines help convey the key MyPlate message to “make half your plate fruits and vegetables.”¹⁶

Meat or Meat Alternate

In the new ruling, SFAs were originally required to comply with the daily and weekly minimum and maximum ranges of meat and meat alternates, whereas previously there was no weekly maximum. Serving age-appropriate portion sizes are an important step for the NSLP in meeting 2010 DGA,⁴ but again, they face several constraints. The USDA Food and Nutrition Service received much feedback from SFAs about the operational challenges to meet serving size

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