



USDA Final Rule Updates School Meal Standards

Big changes are on the horizon for school meal programs. The USDA recently released final updates to the school nutrition standards that will gradually take effect starting THIS school year 2025–26. These updates aim to align meals with the latest nutrition science, while giving schools time to adjust. Here’s what school nutrition professionals need to know:

Added Sugars

- SY 2025–26: Limits will apply to added sugars in breakfast cereals, yogurt, and flavored milk.
- SY 2027–28: Added sugars must make up no more than 10% of weekly calories in school meals.
- This phased approach helps address rising concerns around childhood sugar intake while allowing time for reformulation and menu adjustments.

Milk

- Flavored milk (fat-free or low-fat) remains allowed in all K–12 grades.
- By SY 2025–26, flavored milk must contain no more than 10g of added sugars per 8 oz—a goal already supported by over 90% of school milk providers through the Healthy School Milk Commitment.

Whole Grains

- No major changes. Schools must still ensure that at least 80% of weekly grains are primarily whole grain (at least 50% whole grain).

Flexibility remains to offer enriched, non-whole grain items occasionally to reflect student preferences and cultural foodways.

Sodium Reductions

- A gradual reduction schedule has been adopted:
- Breakfast: 10% sodium reduction by SY 2027–28
- Lunch: 15% sodium reduction by SY 2027–28
- These targets reflect public feedback and aim to balance health goals with kitchen feasibility.

Other Key Changes

- Breakfast flexibility: Schools may now offer meat/meat alternates (e.g., yogurt, eggs, tofu, beans) without grain minimums to meet student protein needs.
- Culturally inclusive meals: Schools serving primarily American Indian and Alaska Native students are encouraged to incorporate traditional Indigenous foods.
- Domestic sourcing: A gradual 5% cap will be introduced on non-domestic food purchases, promoting support for U.S. producers.
- Procurement improvements: Rules will ease sourcing challenges and expand opportunities for local and small-to-medium-sized producers.

These updates reflect a balance between nutrition science, operational realities, and cultural relevance. School nutrition professionals should begin planning now to adapt menus, train staff, and engage vendors in preparation for upcoming implementation dates.

For official guidance, tools, and compliance resources, visit the [USDA's Food and Nutrition Service website](#).