USDA

United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

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Dear Colleague,

I would like to take a few minutes to thank you for the incredible achievements you, as school nutrition professionals, have accomplished in response to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. I also want to ask for your continued support as we move forward this school year with implementing additional provisions of this important law.

As you know, one major goal of the legislation was to help reduce childhood obesity and its associated health risks by helping schools across the country provide healthful meals and snacks to America's children during the school day. Nearly one third of children in the U.S. are at risk for preventable diseases like diabetes and heart disease because they are overweight or obese. Their ability to learn in the classroom, grow up healthy and reach their fullest potential depends on what we do right now to secure their future. We do not have the luxury of time on our side.

Using independent, expert recommendations from the Institute of Medicine, USDA developed new requirements to ensure our kids are offered nutritious options while at school. More than 90 percent of schools report that they are meeting the updated nutrition standards. As a result, schools are providing more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins, in age-appropriate portion sizes. Students are trying a variety of foods they may be seeing for the first time, paving the way for a lifetime of healthy habits.

These changes are working, and we expect to see continued improvements over time. Change can be difficult for anyone in any situation; we know that the generational changes we are seeking take time to implement. We also know there have been challenges, including the fact that food costs are up nationwide. As with everything we do, our attitude toward change is often indicative of the results we'll see. These changes have definitely been easier for some than others, but those who believe they will never be successful are likely setting themselves up for failure.

Your feedback has been vital to the continued success of the programs, and has resulted in many of the flexibilities that USDA has offered. When we first proposed the new meal patterns, your comments and input resulted in a more phased-in approach to the breakfast and lunch changes (including more time for the second sodium limit), removal of the requirement to offer meat at breakfast, and no limits on starchy vegetables. Based on your feedback, we also dropped the proposal for students to take a full serving of fruits and vegetables, and updated the final rule so that students must only take ½ cup of either fruits *or* vegetables under Offer versus Serve.

When you asked to serve larger servings of grains and proteins within the overall calorie caps, we responded with that flexibility in the first year of implementation. Making that change permanent took a few more steps and a little more time, but we were able to do so earlier this year. We did the same for frozen fruit. Based on your input, frozen fruit with a small amount of sugar can now be served in school meals. When we heard the serious concerns about the availability of whole grain-rich pastas, we allowed schools that were having difficulty in getting acceptable products to use traditional pastas for an additional two years. We are also working with industry to ensure that by that time, whole grain-rich pastas suitable for school foodservice will be more widely available.

Communication is more critical than ever right now, and we encourage you to keep us informed of your progress, as well as challenges that you may be facing.

USDA is committed to work closely with our schools to ensure success. We have a variety of resources on our website to support your efforts. These online resources provide guidance on how to boost student acceptance of fruits and vegetables, integrate more whole grains, prepare foods with less sodium, and encourage kids to make healthier snack choices. The website also houses success stories and best practices that you, on the front lines, have shared.

I look forward to seeing those of you who are able to attend the School Nutrition Association's Annual National Conference (ANC) this year in Boston. USDA staff will be there to provide you with program updates and technical assistance. We will also address your questions on a wide variety of topics that include the meal patterns, Smart Snacks, and the Community Eligibility Provision. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to share available resources and best practices, and connect those who have been successful in transitioning to the new requirements with those who still need a little more assistance.

Thank you again for your dedication and tireless commitment to our children. Ensuring school children receive the nutrition they need to learn, grow, and reach their full potential is one of the most important duties we have as community members, educators and leaders. I was drawn to this profession many years ago largely because of you—the people who work together to share ideas, find solutions to challenges, and always put the needs of the children first and foremost. I look forward to seeing many of you in July; for those who will not be attending ANC, please know that USDA values our partnership—and recognizes that it is more important than ever, as we move forward in our joint mission to create a healthier next generation.

Sincerely,

Janey

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