



# FROM POLICY TO *tray* IMPLEMENTING USDA'S UPDATED NUTRITION STANDARDS INTO SCHOOL MEALS

BY LESLEY SHIERY, MS, RD

**IN APRIL 2024**, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released a final rule on nutrition standards for Child Nutrition Programs that aim to align school meals with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), and provide operators with more menu planning flexibilities. The most notable update to the nutrition standards is the introduction of a limit on added sugars. This is the first time school meals will be required to restrict added sugars in their menus.

The final rule went into effect as of July 1, 2024; however, operators are not required to make changes to their menus until July 1, 2025. Many changes will be phased in to allow operators the time to adjust menus, and for manufacturers to reformulate products if needed.

Implementing these new standards may seem daunting. General Mills Foodservice recently offered a webinar and offers tools and resources to help school feeding professionals navigate the changing regulations and set them up for success. With a greater understanding of the latest changes, these updates may not seem

so overwhelming. In fact, many of the changes are designed to simplify menu planning and help school meal menus better meet the cultural preferences of students.

Here's a look at the notable updates to the USDA's standards for Child Nutrition Programs.

## ADDED SUGAR

The final rule includes both product-based added sugar standards and a weekly added sugar standard. The DGA recommends no more than 10 percent of calories from added sugar, and these standards are intended to better align school meal menus to this recommendation. Research conducted by the USDA showed that school breakfasts contained about 17 percent of calories from added sugars, and school lunches contained about 11 percent of calories from added sugars, on average.

### Product-based Added Sugar Standards

The product-based standards cover three categories—breakfast cereal, yogurt, and flavored milk—and must be implemented by July 1, 2025:

- Breakfast cereal: No more than 6 grams added sugar per dry ounce
- Yogurt: No more than 12 grams added sugar per 6 ounces
- Flavored milk: No more than 10 grams added sugar per 8 fluid ounces, and for flavored milk sold à la carte in middle and high school, no more than 15 grams added sugar per 12 fluid ounces

When determining if an item meets the product-based standards, operators will want to look at the Added Sugars line on the Nutrition Facts panel, and not the Total Sugars line.

For some K-12 operators there may be some confusion on label reading when it comes to Total Sugar versus Added Sugar or adding these two together. It is important to note that the Total Sugars line includes both naturally-occurring sugar and added sugar. If you are adding them together, you're double counting the added sugar and it may look like the product doesn't meet standards when it does.

Another important tip is to check the Serving Size. The product-based standards are based on a specific

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### APPLE ORANGE BLENDERLESS SMOOTHIE

Makes 16 servings (8 fluid oz. each)



#### INGREDIENTS

- 4 lbs. Reduced sugar lowfat vanilla yogurt
- 4 cups Orange juice, unsweetened, chilled
- 4 cups Applesauce, unsweetened, chilled

#### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine yogurt and orange juice in 8 quart or larger measurement-marked food storage container; stir until well mixed.
2. Add 2 cups applesauce at a time and stir each in until smooth.
3. Verify finished smoothie yields 4 quarts (so each serving contains 1/2 cup fruit); add additional applesauce if needed.
4. Portion 8 oz. into 9 oz. serving cup; place lids on cups and serve chilled or refrigerate overnight if desired.

**TIP**

Fill cups using the portioned one as a visual guide for remaining servings.

serving size. For example, if you are serving a 2-ounce cereal cup and it has 12 grams of added sugar, this would need to be converted to 1 ounce to determine if it meets standards. In this case, it would be equivalent to 6 grams added sugar per ounce, meeting the requirement.

The product-based added sugar standards for cereal and yogurt will also apply to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) starting October 1, 2025, replacing the current total sugar standard.

### Weekly Added Sugar Standard

In addition to the product-based standards, schools will have to manage added sugar in their overall breakfast and lunch menus starting July 1,

2027. At that time, menus will need to contain no more than 10 percent of calories from added sugar at breakfast and at lunch. As an example, for a school that's serving a weekly average of 500 calories at breakfast, the added sugar in the menu could not be more than 12.5 grams on average across the week.

Implementing the weekly added sugar standard can be approached like the existing sodium and saturated fat standards by balancing it across the week. If foodservice menus contain a day higher in added sugar, another day of the week it can be balanced with a lower added sugar menu. Identifying where in school meal menus added sugar is coming from, and determining if the product or recipe will still work

within the weekly standard or if modifications are needed, is a good starting point as operators prepare to implement this standard.

Heather Swan, General Mills Foodservice's dedicated K-12 corporate chef, offers some tips for lowering added sugar in recipes including using spices like cinnamon or extracts to enhance sweetness; swapping out some of the sugar in a recipe for fruit puree, which works well with quick breads or muffins; or experimenting with savory solutions of traditionally sweet items.

For condiments at breakfast such as maple syrup or honey, which were identified among the top sources of added sugar in school meals, Swan states "Fruit purees can be a great substitute for maple syrup on pancakes or waffles and it's also a way to use up commodity fruits you may have on hand. Simply puree the fruit. You don't need to add any sugar and if needed add a little water or yogurt to help it come together."

Fruit purees can also be used in other ways in school meal menus such as to create smoothie bowls or blenderless smoothies—on-trend menu solutions for students.

### What about Grain-Based Desserts in the School Breakfast Program (SBP)?

School foodservice operators familiar with the proposed rule may remember USDA proposed to limit how often products classified as a 'grain-based dessert' could be served in the SBP; however, this standard was not adopted. Schools can continue to serve breakfast pastries, cereal bars, and breakfast bars across the week. These products will need to fit in the weekly



### BERRY BANANA SMOOTHIE BOWL

Makes 5 servings (12 oz. each)

**INGREDIENTS**

- 1 cup Skim milk
- 4 cups Reduced sugar low-fat yogurt
- 2 cups Strawberries, fresh, halved
- 2 cups Raspberries, fresh
- 3 cups Bananas, chopped

**INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Add milk, yogurt, strawberries, raspberries, and bananas to a large capacity blender (or prepare in batches).
2. Blend on high speed 1 minute; stop blender and stir with spatula.
3. Continue to blend until smooth.
4. Portion 12 oz. into serving bowls, cover and refrigerate until chilled, or overnight for service.

**TIP**  
Top with smoothie bowl favorites such as: honey, granola, sliced bananas, fresh berries, and nuts. Serve frozen if desired.

added sugar standard once that goes into effect July 1, 2027.

USDA provides guidance on 'grain-based desserts' which can be found in Exhibit A of the Grain Requirements for Child Nutrition Programs. Items that do not fall under this classification include muffins, waffles, pancakes, French toast, quick breads, and biscuits—among other products.

#### National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Afterschool Snacks

For schools that participate in the NSLP after-school snack, the USDA adopted changes that would better align this program to that of the CACFP. Key changes include no longer allowing for 'grain-based desserts' to credit towards the grain component, requiring 80 percent of grains served to be whole grain-rich, requiring low-fat or fat-free milk, flavored or unflavored, and limiting the amount of juice that can be served—among other changes. These requirements begin July 1, 2025.

If products classified as 'grain-based desserts' are commonly used in afterschool snack menus, alternatives to swap in include whole grain-rich granola, cereals, graham crackers, cheddar crackers, or snack mixes.

As a top source of whole grains for kids, cereal can be versatile for snacking as a topper for yogurt, served with milk, as part of a snack mix, or just on its own.



**STARTING JULY 1, 2027,**  
schools will need to  
implement a 10 percent  
reduction in sodium at  
breakfast and a 15 percent  
reduction at lunch.

#### SODIUM

The good news for school foodservice operators is that school menus will continue to follow the current sodium standard for the next three school years. Starting July 1, 2027, schools will need to implement a 10 percent reduction in sodium at breakfast and a 15 percent reduction at lunch.

USDA implemented a phased approach for sodium reduction to allow for schools to adjust menus, and manufacturers to reformulate if needed. Gradual reductions in sodium are more successful compared to drastic reductions which can impact student acceptance or the quality of products.

Reviewing menus for their sodium content and identifying whether there are acceptable alternatives can be a step towards achieving further sodium reductions in menus. For example, when serving Mexican cuisine, using brown rice or whole grain corn tortillas in place of flour tortillas can help save on sodium. A 1.5 ounce equivalent of brown rice contains 5 milligrams of sodium versus the same amount of a flour tortilla which contains 200 milligrams sodium.

Creating your own spice mixes, using citrus or vinegar to enhance the flavor and saltiness of foods, and using umami flavors like mushroom can be other strategies. A study done where mushrooms replaced part of the beef in a reduced sodium taco blend showed a flavor difference was not detected.

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### MORE SMOOTHIE RECIPES

A dozen recipes for blenderless smoothies created specifically for K-12 and using reduced sugar vanilla yogurt can be found in the "Stir it Up" recipe collection found here: <https://www.generalmillsfoodservice.com/blenderless-smoothies>

### WHOLE GRAIN

What's changing for whole grain? Nothing! The final rule maintained the current whole grain requirement of at least 80 percent of the weekly grains offered at breakfast and lunch must be whole grain-rich. This means menus with 10 ounce equivalents of grains across the week would need to have eight ounce equivalents as whole grain-rich. What is whole grain-rich? It simply means the grain content of a product is between 50 and 100 percent whole grain and any remaining grains are enriched.

School meals play a key role in helping kids get the whole grains they need. Since the whole grain-rich standards were put into place in 2012, research has shown whole grain intake in kids who eat school meals increased significantly. This is great news, as higher whole grain intakes are consistently linked to better health. Kids still have room to improve their whole grain intake—less than 1 percent of kids meet whole grain recommendations.

Incorporating whole grains into familiar favorites, offering a variety of whole grains for students to choose from, and serving whole grains as part of combination entrees like

sandwiches and pizza rather than as a standalone, all help to promote whole grain intakes in students.

### Flexibility for School Breakfast Menus

The USDA updated the SBP meal pattern to create a combined grain and meat/meat alternate (M/MA) component, giving operators more flexibility in their menus. This means menus no longer must serve a minimum of 1 ounce equivalent grains per day. There continues to be a daily and weekly ounce equivalent that needs to be met based on grade, but starting July 1, 2024 this can be met by serving grains, M/MA, or a combination of the two.

This is not a required change—you can choose to continue to serve grains daily in your menus. If you do opt in to this flexibility, Chef Swan notes there are a few considerations for your menus.

"Grains and lean proteins are both important parts of a healthy dietary pattern. Most kids get enough protein in their diet but fall well below recommendations for whole grains. Grains provide the whole grains kids fall short on and are a top source of key nutrients like folate, iron, and

B-vitamins. They also are a key source of carbohydrates, the preferred source of energy for our bodies and minds," she said.

Swan also notes that when adding in M/MA, menu costs and the impact to sodium and saturated fat in menus will need to be considered.

### OTHER CHANGES AND FLEXIBILITIES

USDA adopted several other changes and flexibilities. This includes allowing nuts and seeds to credit towards the full M/MA versus the current standard of 50 percent, exempting bean dips such as hummus from the total fat requirement in Smart Snacks, and allowing vegetables in place of grains in tribally-operated schools, operated by the Bureau of Indian Education, and that serve primarily American Indian or Alaska Native children. These are just a few examples. School foodservice operators are urged to read the final rule or visit the USDA website to learn about all the updates and changes.

For more information and tools to help navigate the latest USDA Guideline updates, visit <https://www.generalmillsfoodservice.com/industries/k12/regulations-and-bid-support>. 



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