



## FACT SHEET: CALORIES IN SCHOOL MEALS

This paper provides some explanation and direction for States Agencies and School Food Authorities to use in discussions on the new calorie maximum as well as some tips to improve acceptance of school meals.

**School meals play a critical role in helping children learn how to lead healthy lifestyles.** The new standards ensure that children have the energy they need to learn in class and be physically active, while reducing their risk for obesity, diabetes, and other serious chronic diseases. The standards are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (DGAs) as well as the recommendations of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) – an independent panel of experts in health, nutrition, school food service, and economics. Under the new science-based standards, school meals are “right-sized” and reflect the appropriate balance between food groups. In addition to lower-fat dairy and leaner proteins, the new school meals offer more whole grains and nearly twice as many fruits and vegetables at lunch. This results in more nutrient-dense, filling meals within age-appropriate calorie requirements.

Naturally, some places are adjusting to the new standards more easily than others. **Patience and support are needed, particularly in this year of transition.** As schools continue to work toward achieving the new requirements throughout the school year, USDA will continue to be there to help them. While initial reports we are hearing from schools and States have been tremendously positive, we also appreciate that not every student has transitioned to taking, or more importantly eating, all the new foods offered. However, it is important that all students consume meals that are filling and provide lasting energy.

### What can schools and communities do to help in this transition?

**First, educate students about the new standards.** USDA data shows that students have tended not to take all the food available to them in the cafeteria line. Increasing understanding about the amount of food that can be selected through colorful signage and simple, repeated messaging to students can help ensure they are getting maximum energy benefit from their meal.

Also, make sure your menus are taking advantage of all the flexibilities available to schools under the new meal standards. **There are no daily maximum quantities on grains or meats/meat alternates.** The weekly ranges allow menu planners the flexibility to offer favored items of various sizes and adjust accordingly throughout the week. Additionally, grains and meats/meat alternates are rounded down to the nearest quarter-ounce equivalent for crediting purposes. This also offers flexibility to utilize a variety of items. For instance, a 2.2 ounce chicken breast credits as only 2 ounce equivalents.

**Occasional, small quantities of leftovers served on another day will not be counted toward the meal component requirements.** They do count toward weekly calorie limits, and States will need to check that they are not being offered excessively. Second servings that are part of the meal *do* count toward the daily and weekly component requirements; seconds offered a la carte are not counted.

Also, **there are no specific maximums on fruits, vegetables or milk.** Schools may choose to allow greater amounts than the required minimums by offering self-serve salad bars or allowing second servings of these components. Additional offerings *do* count toward the weekly calorie limits, but because fruits and vegetables are generally lower in calories, they can be excellent sources for satisfying meals and sustained energy.

Finally, **there are additional options for feeding those very active students.** In addition to making available second helpings of fruits and vegetables (or even milk) at lunch, schools can also 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 and may opt to continue this practice. Individual students and/or sports teams can also supplement food provided through Federal programs with items provided from home or other sources.