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# Demand for Iowa's Agricultural Products

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# The School Meals Program

by Helen H. Jensen

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**T**HE NATIONAL School Meals Programs affect the lives of almost all school children in the United States today. The National School Lunch Program, available in 99% of US public schools and 83% of private and public schools combined, serves over 31 million school children on a typical school day—nearly 64% of school-age children. The total federal cost of the School Meals Programs was \$14.9 billion in 2012, and most of the funding is provided to school districts through federal reimbursement for free and reduced-price meals, with cash payments for the National School Lunch Program representing about 70% of the total federal funding for the school food programs. Children from households with incomes at or below 130% of poverty can receive a “free” lunch and those from households with incomes between 130% and 185% of poverty can receive a “reduced-price” lunch. During the 2013–2014 school year, the basic cash reimbursement for lunch is set at \$2.93 for free lunches, \$2.53 for reduced-price lunches, and \$0.28 for other qualifying lunches. In addition, schools participating in the National School Lunch Program receive USDA Foods (“entitlement” foods) valued at 22.75 cents in school year 2013 for each lunch served.

Because the school meals reach most children, provide foods to children in need, and support the use of agricultural commodities, the programs have typically received general public support.

Today, unlike the period after World War II when the National School Lunch Program was enacted, the nutrition problems of most children stem not from under-consumption but from over-consumption of calories. The School Meals Programs have undergone major changes since 2010 when they were reauthorized under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. In 2011, new requirements for meal standards were published based on recommendations from the Institute of Medicine to update meals served to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The new dietary specifications, implemented during the previous school year (2012–2013), set limits on calories (ranges for calories) served in meals and specified weekly meal patterns to increase the amount and variety of fruits and vegetables, the amount of whole grains, and dairy available as low fat or skim milk served in the weekly meal pattern. The new meal standards also reduced the amount of sodium, saturated fat, and specified no trans fat. Within the specified meal patterns and calorie ranges, school districts (school food authorities) can make choices about what foods to serve and how they are prepared.

## **If offered, will children choose to eat the healthier meals?**

The new standards for the school lunch and breakfast make changes in what foods are offered, but not in what

children actually consume. Fruits and vegetables are rich in vitamins, minerals, and fiber, and low in calories. Yet, school-age children’s diets are characterized by low intakes of vegetables, fruit, and whole grains. If the school meals programs are to be effective at improving the diets of children, it is important that children participating in the NSLP consume more of the healthier foods.

Of course, there are broader aspects of the school food environment that play an important role in children’s food and nutrient intake as well. Schools develop policies that affect the school lunches served, the location and availability of vending machines and “competitive” foods (foods offered for sale as snack foods or sugar-sweetened beverages in school cafeterias, snack bars, or vending machines), and other food-related policies and practices such as length of the lunch meal, and timing of recess.

As children move to higher grade levels (from elementary to middle school to high school), school environments become less healthy. Children have a lower daily intake of fruits and vegetables, and a larger percentage of calories from fat and saturated fat.

Does participation in the school lunch program change children’s consumption of foods? Taking fruits and vegetables as an example, what is the effect of policies designed to make the school meals healthier? Which policies encourage selection of the fruits and



Photo: USDA/ARS

vegetables in school? Is consumption at home affected? A concern would be that students might consume fruits and vegetables at school, but decrease consumption at home (an apple a day... but only one apple)? Alternatively, it may be that increased consumption at school would encourage children to consume more away from school as well.

### **Some school policies are effective**

Both the federally supported school lunch program and state and local school policies have an important role to play in encouraging school-age children to consume healthier foods, particularly fruits and vegetables.

During the period that led up to the new standards for school meals, school districts throughout the country implemented policies that apply to their own school district in an effort to improve children's food intake.

Recent data from a large national survey make it possible to track how the effects of school environment and policies affect children's intakes of fruits and vegetables—both those consumed at school and at home.

Evidence from a recently published study based on the 2004–2005 School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III (SNDA-III) sponsored by USDA shows that on an average school day, children that participate in the school lunch program consume more fruits and vegetables in school and in total from all sources. However, the higher intake of vegetable consumption occurs through eating more at school and less at home compared with children that did not participate in the school meals program. For the NSLP participants, the vegetables consumed at school may substitute for a portion of the vegetables eaten outside of school.

Policies implemented at schools include restrictions on competitive food sales,

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location of vending machines, not offering french fries or desserts with meals, and providing nutrition education to students or parents. Some policies, such as not offering desserts or restricting à la carte food and beverages and vending food sales are associated with greater fruit and/or vegetable intake at school, but some policies also affect consumption at home. Offering fresh fruits or raw vegetables in school lunches and providing nutrition education to parents leads to increases in fruit consumption away from school. However, other policies, such as restricting the availability of competitive foods is associated with reduced consumption of fruit at home—suggesting that some policies may lead to some substitution between consumption of fruit at school or at home.

### **Policies and school meals**

Although there is general public support for children's nutrition programs, the new standards for school foods and meals have come with intense policy debate. Because of the number of children

served, any change in foods offered and the cost of those foods have significant budgetary implications at the federal and local level. The federal reimbursement to school districts (School Food Authorities) is less than half of what the revised standards are expected to cost. Some complained that children—especially middle and high school boys—were not getting enough to eat at the lunch meal to meet their needs. Despite general support from the nutrition community on the value of the healthier options at school, others are concerned that this is too much interference in what children like to eat or that there is too much waste of foods that are served. In the longer run, whether or not the foods offered are actually consumed by children may depend on other environmental and educational factors. New research is focusing on the school setting and behavioral aspects of the selection of food in the lunchroom, as well as recognizing the importance of peers and parents in forming healthier eating choices.

### **For more information:**

Ishdorj, A., M.K. Crepinsek and H.H. Jensen. Children's Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables: Do School Environment and Policies Affect Choice At School and Away from School? *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* (AEPP), 2013. 35 (2): 341-359.

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