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School Lunch Laws

The issue of childhood obesity and school lunches has come under increasing scrutiny in the past several decades. Despite efforts by local and national groups — such as the First Lady-inspired *Let's Move* campaign and a host of other advocacy groups for healthy eating, children are continuing to suffer from the negative effects of unhealthy eating on school campuses.

For the first time in 15 years, the federal government has taken notice of these health problems facing school-aged children by implementing a major overhaul of the nation's lunch programs.

Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act

In an effort to reduce childhood obesity and increase the health and nutrition of school children in America, the USDA has issued new standards for school lunches. Through the [Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010](#), the USDA does the following:

- Sets nutritional guidelines and standards for lunches served in most schools
- Increases access to free or reduced-cost lunches for students from low-income families
- Monitors school cafeterias to make sure the nutritional standards are met

Under the act, schools are also required to offer fruits and vegetables every day, increase the amount of whole-grain foods, and reduce the sodium and fats in foods served -- which may also include serving only fat-free or low-fat milk. In addition, the new menus must pay attention to portion sizes to make sure children receive calories appropriate to their age.

Can Schools Ban Certain Lunches?

In a few highly publicized cases, parents and educators asked the question whether schools have the right to limit what students may bring to school to eat. On one hand, some argue that certain rules may interfere with their constitutional rights to raise their children according to their own values. On the other hand, some believe that states have an interest in keeping kids safe and healthy through publicly-funded lunch programs.

Below are just some of the cases making national news headlines:

- In Chicago, a local school banned brownbag lunches from being served at all
- A North Carolina student had her turkey sandwich taken away by a state inspector and was served cafeteria chicken nuggets in its place
- National effort to ban "pink slime" beef filler from USDA lunches
- National Physicians Group petitioning to ban milk from school lunches
- School districts across the country banning sugary drinks, like sodas and juices from menus
- California and Massachusetts have considered banning chocolate and flavored milk because of its high sugar content

So, What Can Kids Eat at School?

One possible guide for determining what to pack for your child's lunch might include your state's [Department of Health and Human Services](#) guidelines. These guidelines typically suggest one serving each of meat (or protein product), milk and grain, and two servings of fruit or vegetables. Parents should also limit or eliminate foods with margarine, vegetable shortening and other trans fats.

It may also be a good idea to contact your school's local Parent Teacher Organization, principal, or school board to ask whether a school lunch policy is in place and what you may do if it conflicts with your beliefs.

Click [here](#) for a recommended sample menu from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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