

PRO/CON: Are our school lunches healthy enough?

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First lady Michelle Obama tends the White House garden in Washington, D.C., with a group of children as part of the "Let's Move!" campaign. Photo: AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File

PRO: New rules will make kids healthier and happier

WASHINGTON — As a new school year begins, American parents should enthusiastically join first lady Michelle Obama's campaign for healthier school lunches. It is based on sound nutritional science. Her goal is to make our kids healthier and happier.

The first lady has made improving childhood health through better eating and more exercise the issue she is known for.

That's a wise choice, since childhood obesity has become a national problem: In 2012, 1 in 3 American children were overweight or obese. Overweight children are at higher risk of developing a variety of diseases, including heart disease and diabetes. Living with these diseases makes their lives worse and costs our nation hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

One part of Obama's overall program is the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. It's an update to the national school lunch program, which has helped pay for school meals since 1946. More than 30 million students now participate, but the program hadn't changed much in 15 years.

Less Fat, More Veggies

The Institute of Medicine has pushed for healthier school meals. It recommends meals containing fewer calories, less fat and salt, and more fruit, vegetables and whole grains. Most parents would agree these are excellent goals.

Besides the menu changes, the new law makes it easier for low-income and foster kids to have school meals.

It's important to note that the government only sets guidelines — local school systems create their own menus. And contrary to ridiculous rumors, nothing in the law prohibits bake sales or birthday cakes in the classroom.

Still, as should be expected when making big changes to a national program, there have been glitches. For instance, it turned out many high school athletes needed more protein than the guidelines allowed. The government responded by amending the regulations.

The vast majority of school systems are working with Washington to go along with the changes. More than 90 percent are now meeting the new guidelines. Studies show most kids have grown to like the new, healthier options.

But, just as with health care reform, there are those who, because of their beliefs or politics, prefer attacking the law to improving it. There have been efforts in Congress to hold off on the new nutritional standards for a year. Some supporters of healthy nutrition say junk-food sellers are trying to influence Congress to stall or roll back the new standards.

Good For Kids, Good For Education

It should be no surprise to any parent that kids resist healthy food. But, just like home-cooked food, with sufficient time and encouragement, children can be persuaded to try new foods. Eventually, they come to enjoy them. School systems that phased the changes in slowly found students more ready to accept them.

Organizations that work to promote good nutrition, such as the Food Research and Action Center, completely support the new meal standards. They are also fighting efforts to weaken them.

A congressional study from earlier this year found that the new standards were achieving the goal of better nutrition for kids. It blamed the problems of putting them in place on the speed and size of the changes.

The government has been contributing food and money to our schools to improve student nutrition for years. Such aid is good for the kids, good for education and good for our country. Over the years, assistance has been extended to cover breakfast as well as lunch — and improved, such as in the mid-90s, the last time school meals were updated.

Obama's campaign is just the latest effort to make sure our kids eat right at school. It deserves every parent's support.

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CON: The new rules are restrictive and ignore parents

WASHINGTON — The main focus of the national school meal programs should be meeting students' needs. But for that to happen, there must be recognition that parents know what's best for their children. Neither first lady Michelle Obama nor Congress should think they do.

Unfortunately, the school meal standards that started to go into effect two years ago under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 ignore parents. Instead, the standards favor a federal government that thinks it knows everything.

Those who dare to speak against these standards have quickly felt the wrath of Obama and her supporters.

It's not just politicians who have felt the anger of the first lady. The School Nutrition Association, representing more than 55,000 school nutrition experts, sent a letter to the first lady expressing "disappointment." The group said some of her comments put down school nutrition professionals.

Too Much Government Control

The new meal standards try to control everything about what's served to children. They place severe restrictions on calories, nutritional content and portion sizes. Some schools have left the program. They'd rather sacrifice the massive amounts of money it offers in exchange for freedom from its excessive restrictions.

Our federal government believes it must control nutritional policy in the schools. It assumes parents can't be trusted to teach their children how to make dietary choices that meet their unique needs.

People who support Obama's food policy claim that parents need help because they can't ensure their kids are eating properly at school. Of course, parents can't know every single thing that their children eat at school. Yet this doesn't mean parents haven't taught their children how to make the right choices. But even assuming that schools need to limit food choices, this doesn't make government control right.

Parents concerned about the food provided to their children at school are much better off going to local officials to address these issues. They will generally get the chance to meet with the officials and have their voices heard.

Parents aren't going to get very far trying to convince D.C. politicians about their concerns. Officials have their hands tied with these new standards because they don't have the flexibility to address many concerns.

Greater Flexibility Needed

If the new standards provided greater flexibility to states and local governments, it would help officials better meet the needs of their students. Not only that, but it would also give parents a greater say in the food provided through meal programs.

The federal standards have faced criticism from nutrition officials as well as students. The independent Government Accountability Office surveyed state nutrition officials. It found that local school food authorities had real concerns about the lunch standards, ranging from uneaten food to the costs of meeting the new standards.

The School Nutrition Association has echoed these concerns. The National School Board Association cautioned, "School boards cannot ignore the higher costs and operational issues created by the rigid mandates of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act." Some schools have reportedly even taken money away from teacher pay to cover the extra costs.

Worse, students are disgusted by the food provided to them. According to the GAO report, students in one district held a three-week boycott, refusing to eat school lunches. Students are posting their anger over the program using Twitter at "#ThanksMichelle."

The first lady and other proponents of the standards haven't listened to complaints. They've even opposed giving some poorer schools a one-year break from obeying the standards. Nothing, it seems, will be allowed to slow it from taking effect.

And that's a shame. Washington always hungers for power, but these federal meal standards aren't fit for public consumption. They need to be scrapped.

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Quiz

- 1 Read the following claim by the PRO author:

Studies show most kids have grown to like the new, healthier options.

How would the CON author MOST LIKELY respond to the above claim?

- (A) He would agree, and mention studies that say the same thing.
- (B) He would disagree, and mention studies that say the opposite.
- (C) He would agree, and say kids have started to like healthy food.
- (D) He would disagree, but say that kids will come to like the options.

- 2 Read the following claim by the CON author about the new standards:

They place severe restrictions on calories, nutritional content and portion sizes.

What sentence from the PRO argument BEST responds to the above claim?

- (A) It's important to note that the government only sets guidelines - local school systems create their own menus.
- (B) Besides the menu changes, the new law makes it easier for low-income and foster kids to have school meals.
- (C) Still, as should be expected when making big changes to a national program, there have been glitches.
- (D) It should be no surprise to any parent that kids resist healthy food.

- 3 What type of evidence do BOTH the PRO and CON authors use to support their arguments?

- (A) quotes from experts
- (B) personal experiences
- (C) studies by different groups
- (D) the point of view of parents

- 4 What evidence is the LEAST relevant in the PRO author's claim that people should support the new law?
- (A) the problem of obesity in America
 - (B) kids have grown to like the new, healthier options
 - (C) the additional money poor kids will get for lunches
 - (D) efforts to hold off on the new standards for a year