



## Flexibility forecast

USDA offers smaller schools more relief from strict nutrition standards, reports Amelia Levin







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qualified applicants to oversee their school meal programs. Another effort will make applying for subsidized meals easier for families. Since introducing tightened nutrition requirements in 2015 as part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, many smaller, less-equipped schools struggled to meet the new standards. The USDA is providing a 60-day public comment period and will then develop a final rule that responds to the needs of partners and stakeholders.

“Small and rural school districts will no longer have to overlook qualified food service professionals because of one-size-fits-all standards that don’t meet their needs,” says Censky. “We trust our local partners to hire talented school nutrition program directors who will manage the meal service in a way that protects the health and well-being of students.”

To help local school districts improve the accuracy of their school meal application processes, the agency has also rolled out a suite of customizable resources, including support for online applications, evidenced-based materials, and best practices to simplify the process for families and ensure that all eligible children receive free and reduced-priced meals. The USDA has also invited software developers in the private industry to help schools tailor their applications.

Censky’s announcement is the latest in a series of recent USDA actions intended to expand flexibility and ease

challenges for partners and stakeholders who help feed our nation’s children.

In 2017, the agency also published the *School Meal Flexibility Rule*, which provides local foodservice professionals the flexibility they need to serve wholesome, nutritious, and tasty meals in schools across the nation.

The USDA has also released The Food Buying Guide, a mobile app intended to help with purchasing and decision-making on behalf of school foodservice operators.

Other actions have included loosening some requirements in areas like milk (low-fat, flavored milk is now an option), whole grains and sodium limits.

Critics of the recent loosening of The National School Lunch Program, however, argue the federal government has backtracked on its earlier efforts to improve the quality and nutrition of the foods that are a part of (or excluded from) school cafeterias today, and that these changes make it easier for food manufacturers to continue their profitable contracts with school foodservice operators.

About 100,000 schools and institutions feed 30 million children through the National School Lunch Program and nearly 15 million children through the School Breakfast Program. Many of these children receive their meals at no cost or for a reduced price according to income-based eligibility.

USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers 15 nutrition assistance programs, including the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which together comprise America’s nutrition safety net. ■

**T**he USDA announced plans to offer more flexibility in regards to school foodservice requirements and legislation in an effort to help states and school districts operate their school meal programs more efficiently. The announcement by USDA deputy secretary Steve Censky came in March at the School Nutrition Association Legislative Action Conference in Washington, DC.

One effort will provide more assistance for school districts with less than 2,500 students in recruiting