

Students throw away less food with new healthier school lunches

5 March 2015, by Daniel P. Jones



The updated nutrition standards are based on recommendations from an Institute of Medicine panel of experts.

After the U.S. Department of Agriculture's healthier school meal standards went into effect, students ate more fruit and threw away less of their entrees and vegetables than before the changes, according to a study published today in *Childhood Obesity*.

The study was led by the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. It is among the first studies to reliably measure student consumption of entrees, fruits, [vegetables](#), and milk during lunch before and after the healthier [standards](#) took effect.

Contrary to concerns about increased food waste following the initial implementation of the updated standards, this study shows that [students](#) are throwing away less food now than they were before the standards were in place.

"This research adds to evidence that the updated [nutrition standards](#) for the National School Lunch Program can succeed in helping students eat healthier," said Marlene Schwartz, the study's lead author and director of the Rudd Center.

Researchers analyzed students' food selection, consumption, and waste before and after the updated standards were in place by photographing and weighing individual items on lunch trays. Specifically, researchers tracked students from 12 middle schools in an urban school district for three years – from the spring of 2012 through the spring of 2014 – before the standards changed and two years after.

More than 70 percent of the students in the district qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Nearly half of the students (47 percent) are African-American, 38 percent are Hispanic, and 15 percent are white.

In addition to finding that more students chose fruit after the updated standards went into effect, 66 percent up from 54 percent, the study found:

- The amount of fruit students consumed did not change significantly over the three-year period. In 2014, students ate 74 percent of the fruit they selected for lunch.
- Students were more likely to take fruit if a greater variety of fruit was offered. For every additional type of fruit offered, there was a significant increase (9 percent) in students who took fruit as part of their lunch.
- Fewer students chose a vegetable (68 percent in 2012 compared with 52 percent in 2014). However, the percentage of vegetables they consumed increased by nearly 20 percent, from 46 percent to 64 percent, which effectively decreased the amount of vegetables thrown away.
- Students consumed more of their lunch entrees (up from 71 percent of their entrée

in the spring of 2012 to 84 percent in 2014), thus also decreasing food waste.

"Some have expressed concern about the requirement that students take a [fruit](#) or vegetable," Schwartz said. "We're seeing a very positive response from students."

This study follows recent polling and research showing broad support for healthier meals among parents and students: an October 2014 poll from the Pew Charitable Trusts, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the American Heart Association found that 72 percent of parents nationwide favor strong nutrition standards for school foods. A survey of school leaders released in July 2014 revealed widespread student acceptance of healthier meals across all grade levels.

The updated nutrition standards – enacted by Congress in 2010 under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and implemented by the USDA in the fall of 2012 – are based on recommendations from an Institute of Medicine panel of experts.

More information: New School Meal Regulations Increase Fruit Consumption and Do Not Increase Total Plate Waste: [online.liebertpub.com/doi/pdf/...0.1089/chi.2015.0019](https://online.liebertpub.com/doi/pdf/10.1089/chi.2015.0019)

Provided by University of Connecticut

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