



# Impact of Federal Commodity Programs on School Meal Nutrition

## Policy Highlight

### POLICY PERSPECTIVE

At a time when nearly one-third of U.S. children and teens are overweight or obese,<sup>1</sup> it is critical for federal school meal programs to provide healthy foods to students. Although the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Child Nutrition Commodity Program offers many nutritious options, research shows that schools are mostly ordering foods high in fat that fail to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. And many commodity foods are processed before they are served to students, which can increase levels of fat, sugar and sodium. As a result, many school meals fail to meet school nutrition standards. Significant changes must be made at the school district level to improve the quality of children's diets and to address the urgent threat of our nation's childhood obesity epidemic.

### Background

The number of overweight and obese children and adolescents has reached epidemic proportions, and recent federal surveys show that most school meals do not meet federal nutrition guidelines.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, there is growing interest in the nutritional quality of foods available in U.S. schools—and in the role of the government in helping to make school meals healthier for students. Providing healthy foods to students is crucial, particularly for low-income children for whom school meals may be the only, or the most nutritious, calories they consume most days of the week. Low-income children, who are disproportionately affected by childhood obesity, make up two-thirds of school lunch program participants and up to 90 percent of school breakfast program participants.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture currently provides school districts with more than 180 different commodity food items per year valued at approximately \$1 billion,<sup>3</sup> which makes the commodity program the largest single source of foods for schools. The nutritional quality of the foods ordered by schools through the commodity program, however, is particularly alarming. While commodity foods comprise only 20 percent of the school meal, they set the tone for the entire meal. For instance, many meals are planned around the high-fat foods ordered through the commodities program, turning them into pizza, chicken nuggets and other processed foods.

Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, recently conducted the first ever comprehensive analysis of how the USDA Child Nutrition Commodity Program impacts the nutritional quality of school meals. The report finds that commodity foods ordered by school districts fall far short of the nutritional benchmarks recommended by the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. While this report focused primarily on California's commodity food system, its findings include both federal and state policy recommendations that can be applied beyond California.

### Key Findings

Important findings from *The Impact of the Federal Child Nutrition Commodity Program on the Nutritional Quality of School Meals in California* include:

- Nationally, more than 50 percent of commodity foods are sent to processors before they are sent to schools. Processing is not regulated for nutritional quality and often involves adding fat, sugar and sodium to commodity products. For example, breaded nuggets are a common end product of chicken and frozen fruit may be served up in pastries or desserts. By the time many of these “healthier” commodities reach students, they have about the same nutritional value as junk foods.

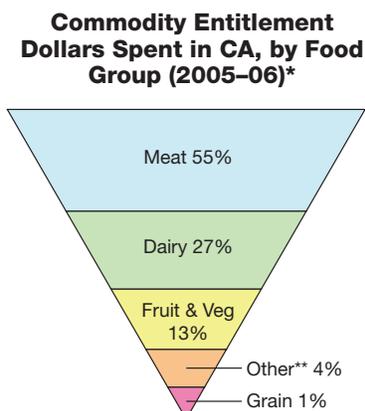
**The USDA Child Nutrition Commodity Program** provides \$1 billion for more than 180 different commodities, including meats, cheeses, rice, pasta, produce and legumes. These commodities comprise 20 percent of school meals. The program supports American agriculture producers by providing cash reimbursements for meals served in schools and enables schools to purchase products in bulk for a reduced cost.

**FAST FACTS**

- More than 23 million youth ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese.<sup>4</sup>
- More than 100,000 schools offer the federal school lunch program to nearly 30 million children each day, at a cost of \$8 billion in cash reimbursements and \$1 billion in commodities.<sup>5</sup>
- Of the 30 million children who eat school lunches each day, 17.4 million are classified as low-income, and receive free or reduced-price meals.<sup>6</sup>
- About 7 percent of U.S. schools serve lunches that meet all of the USDA’s School Meal Initiative standards.<sup>7</sup>

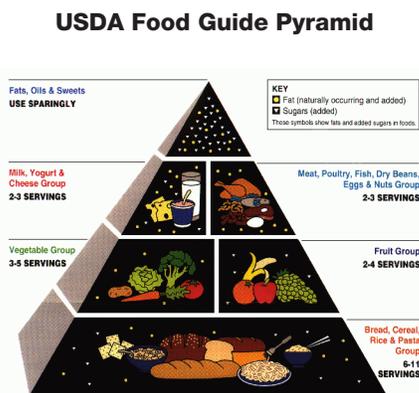
- In California school districts spent more than 82 percent of the commodity funds (nationally the average is 72 percent) to order meat and cheese items, which are both relatively high in fats and saturated fats. Orders of fruit, fruit juice, vegetables and legumes accounted for only 13 percent of these funds.
- A comparison between recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines and actual funds spent on federal commodity foods by California schools includes:
  - The Dietary Guidelines recommend 6 to 11 servings of grains, yet only 1 percent of California’s commodity funding is spent on grains.
  - The Dietary Guidelines recommend 5 to 9 servings of vegetables and fruit, yet only 13 percent of California’s commodity funding is spent on vegetables and fruit.
  - The Dietary Guidelines recommend only 2 to 3 servings of dairy, yet 27 percent of California’s commodity funding is spent on dairy.
  - The Dietary Guidelines recommends only 2 to 3 servings of meat and poultry, yet 55 percent of California’s commodity funding is spent on meat.

**Commodity Foods Ordered vs. Daily Recommended Nutritional Guidelines**



\* The numbers in the pyramid represent the percentage of dollars spent in California by school districts on commodities used in school meals for 2005-06, which was the year used to conduct the quantitative analysis for this study.

\*\* The other category includes proteins such as nuts and nut butters and other items that did not fit into any of the other food categories.



The image of the USDA Food Guide Pyramid offers an easy visual comparison between the commodity foods ordered by school districts and daily recommended nutritional guidelines. In April 2005, MyPyramid replaced the Food Guide Pyramid. The current recommendations offered by MyPyramid have not diverged significantly from those offered by the former Food Guide Pyramid.

## Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations for policy-makers are based on the research presented in *The Impact of the Federal Child Nutrition Commodity Program on the Nutritional Quality of School Meals in California*:

- Per the 2004 Reauthorization of Child Nutrition and WIC legislation, align School Meal Initiative Standards with current Dietary Guidelines for Americans and ensure school meals—which are heavily based on federal commodity foods—are meeting these guidelines.
- Implement nutrition guidelines for processors to align processed commodities with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Increase the proportion and amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables purchased by the federal government for use in the school lunch program.
- Provide grants to school for one-time-only infrastructure costs, such as the creation or expansion of refrigeration and freezing capacity, incurred to support the storage and preparation of fruits and vegetables.

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- 1 Ogden CL, Carroll MD and Flegal KM. “High Body Mass Index for Age Among US Children and Adolescents, 2003–2006.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 299(20): 2401–2405, May 2008.
  - 2 Gordon A, Crepinsek MK, Nogales R and Condon E. “School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III, Vol. I: School Foodservice, School Food Environment, and Meals Offered and Served.” Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research, Nutrition and Analysis, 2007.
  - 3 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services. “USDA Commodities in the National School Lunch Program.” Alexandria, VA: 2007.
  - 4 Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Flegal KM. “High Body Mass Index for Age Among US Children and Adolescents, 2003–2006.”
  - 5 Food Research and Action Center. “Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the School Lunch Program: Historical Role, Current Operations, and Future Potential.” Washington, DC: 2007.
  - 6 Food Research and Action Center. “Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the School Lunch Program: Historical Role, Current Operations, and Future Potential.”
  - 7 Gordon A, Crepinsek MK, Nogales R and Condon E. “School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III, Vol. I: School Foodservice, School Food Environment, and Meals Offered and Served.”