

US Congress blocks rules on healthier school lunches

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18 November 2011

Congress blocked new rules on November 14 that would have improved nutritional content in school lunches. The changes, drafted by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), called for more fruits and vegetables, a lower limit on sodium and starchy foods, and the declassification of pizza sauce as a serving of vegetables.

The USDA issued its proposal in January as a gradual, modest means of addressing rising childhood obesity and associated health problems. Its provisions, based on 2009 recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine, were intended "to offer school meals that are nutrient-rich and calorie-appropriate."

The USDA estimated that the bill would have added 14 cents to the cost of a school lunch, or some \$6.8 billion over five years. The draft rules were submitted to Congress in June; in October the Senate blocked proposed restrictions on serving potatoes—typically in the form of French fries, a food high in salt and fat—in schools.

Major food corporations including Coca-Cola, Del Monte, the salt industry, frozen pizza-producers ConAgra and Schwan's and other manufacturers of processed foods immediately objected to the rules on the grounds they would raise costs and require food children would simply discard.

In its rejection of the more stringent provisions Monday, the Republican-led House Appropriation Committee said it had acted to "prevent overly burdensome and costly regulations and to provide greater flexibility for local school districts to improve the nutritional quality of meals." The bill, part of a House-Senate compromise on the USDA budget, is expected to be voted on in the coming week.

The action recalls the infamous USDA proposal

during the Reagan-era to change the classification of ketchup and pickle relish from condiments to vegetables. Part of Reagan's 1982 plan to slash \$1 billion from the school lunch program, the measure would have allowed schools to cut out a serving of cooked or fresh vegetables from the nutrition requirements for hot lunches.

The current congressional action is another illustration of the subservience of the political establishment to corporate interests. At the expense of the health of children, and particularly those from low-income families most dependent on the meals they receive in public schools, Congress has ensured a captive market to junk food manufacturers.

As a result, the current 15-year-old guidelines remain unchanged. Pizza and French fries, often served in public schools on a weekly basis, will continue to be classified as containing a serving of vegetables. Slices of frozen pizzas are required to have no more than two tablespoons of tomato paste in order to qualify. Schools will not be required to increase the amount of whole grains or fresh produce served.

The food industry hailed the decision. "This is an important step for the school districts, parents and taxpayers who would shoulder the burden of USDA's proposed \$6.8 billion school meal regulation that will not increase the delivery of key nutrients," National Potato Council CEO John Keeling told the *New York Times*. A November 15 statement of the lobbying group American Frozen Foods Institute "commends Congress for its balanced approach... This agreement improves childhood nutrition by providing school nutritionists the ability to serve healthy foods kids enjoy while avoiding burdening schools with massive new costs."

The feigned concern for tight school budgets ignores the source of the crisis, namely in the aggressive attack

on public education spearheaded by the Obama administration on the one hand, and the endless handouts and tax cuts for major corporations on the other that have deprived basic services of billions of dollars in governmental funding.

Millions of schoolchildren have been subjected to overcrowded classrooms, cuts in busing and after-school programs, and other needed social resources. Lower income children, who may suffer bouts of hunger, have unstable living arrangements and inconsistent money for lunch and basic supplies, are especially vulnerable to the elimination of school-based services.

At the same time, cuts to public education at the state and federal levels have compelled financially distressed school districts to open their doors to corporate “sponsors,” including food companies who are given advertising and sales access to cafeterias. Vending machines offering candy, chips, soda, and other unhealthy foods are present in many schools, effectively competing with school lunches. These “competitive foods,” as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines them, contribute to obesity and, because of their low-nutrient content, to vitamin deficiency in children.

Over the past several decades, the percentage of children and adolescents who are obese has more than tripled. The CDC reports that one in three Americans aged 6-19 years old are overweight or obese. Rates of childhood diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, asthma, and other associated health problems are also on the rise.



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