



# Cafeteria Conundrum

Despite negative press, most say National School Lunch Program being well-received — and beef is making inroads on being included.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

It was a bit of a rocky start for the National School Lunch Program as schools reconvened in late August. Students were barely back in the classroom for a couple of weeks when an Associated Press (AP) article ran with a headline claiming, “Some school districts quit healthier lunch program.”

Janey Thornton, deputy undersecretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, immediately responded to the article with a statement to the press emphasizing, “The truth is that the vast majority of schools across the country are meeting the updated meal standards successfully, which is so important to help all our nation’s children lead healthier lives.”

Her statement continued, “Even before the new standards took effect and more resources were available, many schools across the country were leading the way with healthier options and appropriate portion sizes. In fact, schools that adopted the changes earlier report that participation increased as

students and parents became accustomed to the healthier options.”

Thornton then supplied a list of success stories from 40 states related to the National School Lunch Program that have appeared on USDA-related blogs. Many feature comments from school nutrition directors talking up the positives they’ve seen from the changes to the National School Lunch Program.

The changes to the lunch meal patterns stem from the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and were implemented during the 2012-2013 school year. Lunches now follow MyPlate based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans — meaning half the plate must be fruits and vegetables, while one-fourth of the plate is whole grains and the remaining one-fourth is a protein — which in addition to meat could include legume-based beans and peas, tofu and soy, yogurt, cheese, nuts, seeds and eggs. Students also receive a serving of fat-free or low-fat milk. Additionally, school

meals must follow serving requirements for calorie ranges, as well as grain and protein servings per day and week.

## Current status?

The question remains — are the revised, healthier standards being accepted, and are students eating their school lunch?

Dayle Hayes says the answer is yes.

“Students are having positive responses to school meals,” states Hayes, a registered dietitian, long-time member of the School Nutrition Association and founder of the online community School Meals That Rock ([www.facebook.com/SchoolMealsThatRock](http://www.facebook.com/SchoolMealsThatRock)). She travels the country working with school districts and food organizations (such as state and national beef councils), helping them stay current with the USDA guidelines and ensuring they are part of the healthier approach.

Of the new standards initiated with schools last year, Hayes says, “This is a process. We need to view it as a process, and parents need to support it, as well. The goal is to offer healthier, nutrient-dense school meals that help ensure children are well-nourished so they have strong bodies and smart brains that are ready to learn.”

With specific regard to beef, Hayes reports that several new beef recipes were created by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) and the beef checkoff last March to fit the new protein and calorie standards, and she says schools have shown an excellent response in utilizing those recipes. Examples include a Rock-and-Roll Beef Wrap, Wranglers Beef Chili, and Sweet and Sloppy Joe. (See more recipe examples at [www.beefnutrition.org/](http://www.beefnutrition.org/).)

“Schools are looking for ways to add beef. School nutrition directors recognize that kids like beef,” says Hayes. However, she emphasizes that it has been imperative to have recipes that go beyond burgers and spaghetti and meatballs. She explains that having recipes with new flavor profiles and that include more vegetables in them — such as corn in the chili and peppers in the sloppy-joe mix — help better meet the healthier nutrition standards.

In New York, Cindy Chan Phillips, a registered dietitian and director of nutrition education for the New York Beef Council, reports that they have partnered with school services directors to promote healthy beef recipes with the students.

“We need to recognize students are consumers, and their feedback should be considered in planning the school recipes,” Phillips says. “Nutrition is key, but we found out appearance and other attributes are important, as well.”

As an example, at South Jefferson School District in Adams, N.Y., the New York Beef Council participated in a lunch-hour food show where new recipes were offered for tasting. About 233 high-school students were surveyed. Phillips says the No. 1 factor behind their choice of entrée on the buffet was appearance. She says beef recipes with ethnic ingredients were popular, as well.

The good news: “About 90% of those surveyed on the healthy beef recipes with cool names such as Rock-n-Roll Beef Wrap said they would choose the entrée again,” Phillips reports.

In South Dakota, the Chester Area School District recently implemented new beef recipes into the lunch menu for the 2013-2014 school year. Kristi Lewis, business manager and foodservice director for the school says, “Pizza Subs and Rock-and-Roll Beef Wraps are a big hit with the students. The district has seen an increase in the number of students eating healthier lunches at school this year.”

### **Beef promotion efforts must continue**

Looking forward, Hayes adds that the beef industry will need to continue to be diligent in promoting beef as a part of school lunch menus. She notes that other proteins, grains and commodity groups are also working to

**Missouri school-based program also addresses student health**

In Missouri, a school-based program called Jump Into Action (JIA) is helping teach fifth-grade students to make healthy food choices and to be more active. At participating schools, a team approach is used that includes the physical education teacher, classroom teacher, school nurse and parents working together to implement a curriculum designed by University of Missouri Extension.

Kids learn about making healthy food choices — more fruits, vegetables and dairy as opposed to processed foods and sugary drinks — to nourish their growing bodies, and each student uses a personal pedometer. They then compare their pedometer readings against goals they set for themselves to help encourage physical activity.

Weekly lessons are bolstered by monthly checkups, and parent newsletters provide support at home. Extension organizers say as a result of the program, kids have even asked for healthier food on the school lunch menu. Since being implemented in 2004 in fifth-grade classrooms across the state, Jump Into Action has reached 50,000 students.

For more about the program, visit: <http://extension.missouri.edu/hes/jumpintoaction/>.

promote their products, so the beef industry must continually promote its nutrition assets.

Additionally, Hayes foresees the next major focus for the National School Lunch Program being continued momentum for the local foods movement. Some of that is already occurring, primarily with fruits and vegetables, but Hayes says beef producers in Montana and Maine have some contracts supplying their local school districts.

“The schools are looking for ongoing relationships in sourcing where food comes from,” Hayes explains.

Perhaps the biggest continuing challenge to the school lunch programs is cost, which could impact beef’s inclusion. Hayes concludes, “Very few schools are having problems with kids accepting the ‘new’ school lunch, but many are challenged by food costs.” She notes that it’s hard to serve a healthy lunch with a food budget of \$1.50 to \$2 per meal.



**Editor’s Note:** Kindra Gordon is a cattlemaster and freelancer from Whitewood, S.D.