

# FEDERAL STUDENT LUNCH STANDARDS: THE ANTI-POPEYE

## QUICK STATS

- ✗ **CONFERENCE:** Regulation
- ✗ **TEAM:** Department of Agriculture
- **FUMBLE:** Feds prevent schools from adequately feeding students
- **HOW TO RECOVER THE BALL:** Include grain requirements amendment in FY 2016 funding bills and reject centralized meal planning for every school in America

Many American families grew up watching Popeye on television. He would eat his spinach, grow strong, and take on the bad guys. The federal government, evidently wanting all children to grow up with Popeye's healthy eating habits, recently changed federal school lunch requirements with the goal of improving childhood diets and reducing obesity. Unfortunately someone forgot that most kids hate spinach.



*Photo: Twitter*

To improve childhood diets and reduce obesity, USDA developed nutritional standards under the authority of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. These rules placed limits on the amount of meats and grains permitted in school lunches.

USDA has various rules for school nutritional standards. However, the rules often conflict with each other and are nearly impossible for

schools to implement. For example one USDA rule establishes limits for meats in lunches while another sets minimum and maximum calorie requirements for different grades. In schools with multiple grade levels, where the maximum calories allowed for students grades 6-8 (700 calories) are below the minimum calorie requirement for students grades 9-12 (750 calories), schools were forced to develop different meal plans.<sup>26</sup>

The rule also prohibited baked goods with even trace amounts of cornmeal from inclusion in school lunches. As a result, lunchtime staples, such as bagels, may not meet the school nutrition standards. In the end many students chose not to eat the meals they were served because they simply did not like them. Federally mandated lunch standards actually cause many students to not eat enough at lunch. These government meals also do not take into consideration that dietary needs may differ from student to student. A senior offensive lineman on the football team may have different caloric needs than the freshman trumpet player. Families know best what their children should eat for lunch. USDA should not force on schools burdensome meal standards that do not provide enough calories for growing children and are often rejected by students.

## **RECOVERY**

Not surprisingly, GAO found that these regulations were nearly impossible for schools to implement.<sup>27</sup> To improve children's health

and nutrition at school, GAO recommended USDA remove the meat and grain limits and allow schools the flexibility to comply with the rules. The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee addressed GAO's concerns by providing schools with flexibility to meet USDA grain and sodium requirements in its FY 2016 Agriculture Appropriations Bill, which was sent to the full Senate on July 16, 2015.<sup>28</sup> When Congress completes work on the FY 2016

funding bills, this common-sense provision should be included. But since appropriations bills only solve these issues for one year at a time, USDA should step up and provide American schools the flexibility they need to improve the health and nutrition of students, and Congress should reject the notion that Washington, DC, should plan the school lunchroom menu each day. The Founders would be appalled.

***[For more information, please visit:](#)***

***[GAO: Testimony of Kay E. Brown before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives](#)***  
***[S.1800 – Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2016](#)***