

From Staff to Students:

New Dietary Guidelines, Ultra-Processed Foods, and the Future of School Nutrition



Speaker



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Learning Objectives

1. Identify **MakeAmericaHeathyAgain** goals for School Foods
2. Define “Ultra Processed Food”
3. Explain the health risks associated with ultra-processed foods (also called UPFs)
4. Review 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) and how they could change our guidelines for school nutrition:

Current Priorities At USDA



Current USDA Priorities

Current Key Themes with USDA:

- **Emphasis on “real food”**

Programs are encouraged to prioritize whole, nutrient-dense foods and gradually use less highly processed items, particularly those high in added sugars, sodium, and refined grains.

- **Preparation for future meal pattern updates**

No changes to meal pattern requirements YET.

USDA is laying the groundwork for future rulemaking to better align school meals with the updated DGAs.



Current USDA Priorities

Legislative Update: USDA FNS Final Rule on Whole Milk at Breakfast

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has issued a final rule under the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act of 2025, restoring the option for schools and child nutrition providers to serve whole and reduced-fat (2%) milk in federally funded programs, **including the School Breakfast and Afterschool Snack Programs.**

Effective date: June 8, 2026

Milk options: Whole, 2%, 1%, fat-free, and flavored milks are now permitted alongside existing choices. Menu planners do not have to count the saturated fat from fluid milk when calculating the weekly average saturated fat requirement at lunch and breakfast, but added calories are still counted.



Current USDA Priorities

- **Focus on food quality within existing rules**

Schools are encouraged to work within current regulations to improve menu quality, ingredient choices, and overall nutritional value.

- **Support for American agriculture and local procurement**

SFAs are encouraged to look for opportunities to strengthen connections with domestic producers, including locally sourced foods where feasible.

- **Continued commitment to program integrity and access**

Ensuring meals remain accessible, compliant, and fiscally responsible remains a central priority alongside nutrition improvements.



Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2026

USDA



The MAHA Report

- Poor diet and ultra-processed foods identified as a one of four potential drivers behind increasing childhood chronic disease
- Noted that school meal patterns “do not set limits on UPF consumption, leading to excessive intake of sugar, processed carbohydrates, processed fats, and sodium among children
- Critique reformulation and “minor ingredient adjustments” to meet Smart Snacks
- Highlight other countries’ approaches, including France, Japan, Sweden, and Finland



[The MAHA Report - The White House](#)

Strategy Report

- Limit or prohibit the use of petroleum-based food dyes; USDA will apply the framework to food served through the school lunch program.
- Continue efforts to develop a definition for “Ultraprocessed Food”
- Remove restrictions on whole milk sales in schools
- Eliminate mandatory reduced-fat requirements in federal nutrition programs



[The-MAHA-Strategy-WH.pdf](#)

Ultra-processed Foods

Health Harms associated with UPFs

- Increased risk of metabolic syndrome, diabetes, cancer, obesity, and all-cause mortality
- Higher body mass index, blood sugar, and blood pressure
- Poorer cardiometabolic health outcomes, even when accounting for overall diet quality
- Greater risk of cognitive impairment and dementia in older adults.

Ultra-processed Foods



- NOVA Classification System
- Criteria: **extent** and **purpose** of processing
- Developed by Dr. Carlos Monteiro in 2010 in response to increasing rates of obesity and chronic disease and displacement of traditional diets in Brazil
- Goal: Describe the foods interfering with and transforming traditional Brazilian diets to the detriment of public health

NOVA Classification

Group	Extent of processing	Purpose of processing	Examples
Nova 1: Unprocessed and minimally processed foods	Edible parts of plants or animals that remain whole or undergo minimal alterations like cutting, drying, freezing, or pasteurization. No other food substances added to the original food.	To extend food life, enable longer storage, make preparation easier.	Milled grains, raw meat, fresh fruits and vegetables, milk, eggs, nuts 

NOVA Classification

Group	Extent of processing	Purpose of processing	Examples
Nova 2: Processed culinary ingredients	Substances extracted from Nova 1 foods through pressing, refining, or grinding.	For use in the preparation, seasoning, and cooking of Nova 1 foods. <i>May contain preservatives</i>	Oil, butter, sugar, salt 

NOVA Classification

Group	Extent of processing	Purpose of processing	Examples
Nova 3: Processed foods	Nova 1 foods with added Nova 2 ingredients, using preservation methods such as canning, pickling, curing, smoking, or fermentation.	To increase the durability of Nova 1 foods and make them more enjoyable by modifying or enhancing their sensory qualities. <i>May contain preservatives</i>	Canned vegetables in brine; salted nuts; cured meats, fruits in syrup, freshly made unpackaged breads and cheeses. 

NOVA Classification

Group	Extent of processing	Purpose of processing	Examples
Nova 4: Ultra-processed foods	Industrial formulations using extracted substances, chemically modified ingredients, and cosmetic additives (flavors, colors, emulsifiers). Multiple processing steps.	To create highly profitable products (low-cost ingredients, long shelf-life, branding + marketing) that are convenient (ready-to-consume) and hyper-palatable. Liable to displace all other Nova food groups, especially Nova 1 foods.	Soda, packaged bread, breakfast cereal, frozen pizza, hot dogs, ice cream 

NOVA Classification

- Nova Category 4 are industrial formulations designed for the purpose of competing with the other three Nova groups and maximizing industry profits
- Manufacturers do not disclose purpose of processing/formulation, so Nova uses additives as markers for manufacturer intent:
 - Food substances of no culinary use (e.g., high-fructose corn syrup, modified starches)
 - Cosmetic additives (e.g., flavors, colors)

Group	Extent of processing	Purpose of processing	Examples
Nova 4: Ultra-processed foods	Industrial formulations using extracted substances, chemically modified ingredients, and cosmetic additives (flavors, colors, emulsifiers). Multiple processing steps.	To create highly profitable products (low-cost ingredients, long shelf-life, branding + marketing) that are convenient (ready-to-consume) and hyper-palatable. Liable to displace all other Nova food groups, especially Nova 1 foods.	Soda, packaged bread, breakfast cereal, frozen pizza, hot dogs, ice cream 

UPFs

How do they hurt health?

What the Food Matrix Is

The food matrix is the **physical structure** in which nutrients exist — including protein networks, fat globules, fiber, and water — that influences how nutrients are released, absorbed, and interact with the body.

The food matrix “Governs the metabolic fate of nutrients”

It affects:

Chewing/texture

Ability of your body to use the nutrients in the food

Signals that tell your brain “I’m full” or “I’m hungry”

Gut bioflora (good bacteria)

Metabolic hormone responses – best example is Insulin

UPFs

How do they hurt health?

Health Implications...A degraded matrix can:

Speed up eating by softening texture, reducing chewing, and weakening early satiety signals

Speed up how fast nutrients are absorbed in your body- impacts appetite regulation

Promote insulin resistance and liver fat production due to rapid nutrient flux

Disrupt gut microbiota and weaken the intestinal barrier, leading to low-grade inflammation

Linked by diet studies to higher disease risk: obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, dementia

UPFs

How Much is Too Much?



Choose **MyPlate.gov**

FOCUS ON FRUITS
Fruits may be fresh, canned, frozen, or dried, or 100% juice. Make half your plate fruits and vegetables.

VARY YOUR VEGETABLES
Include dark green, red, orange, beans and peas, starchy, and other varieties.

MAKE AT LEAST HALF YOUR GRAINS WHOLE
Eat more whole grains such as whole wheat, bulgur, oatmeal, whole cornmeal, and brown rice.

GO LEAN WITH PROTEIN
Choose from a variety of meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, soy foods like tofu, nuts and seeds.

GET YOUR CALCIUM RICH FOODS
Choose fat-free or low-fat milk, yogurt and cheese.

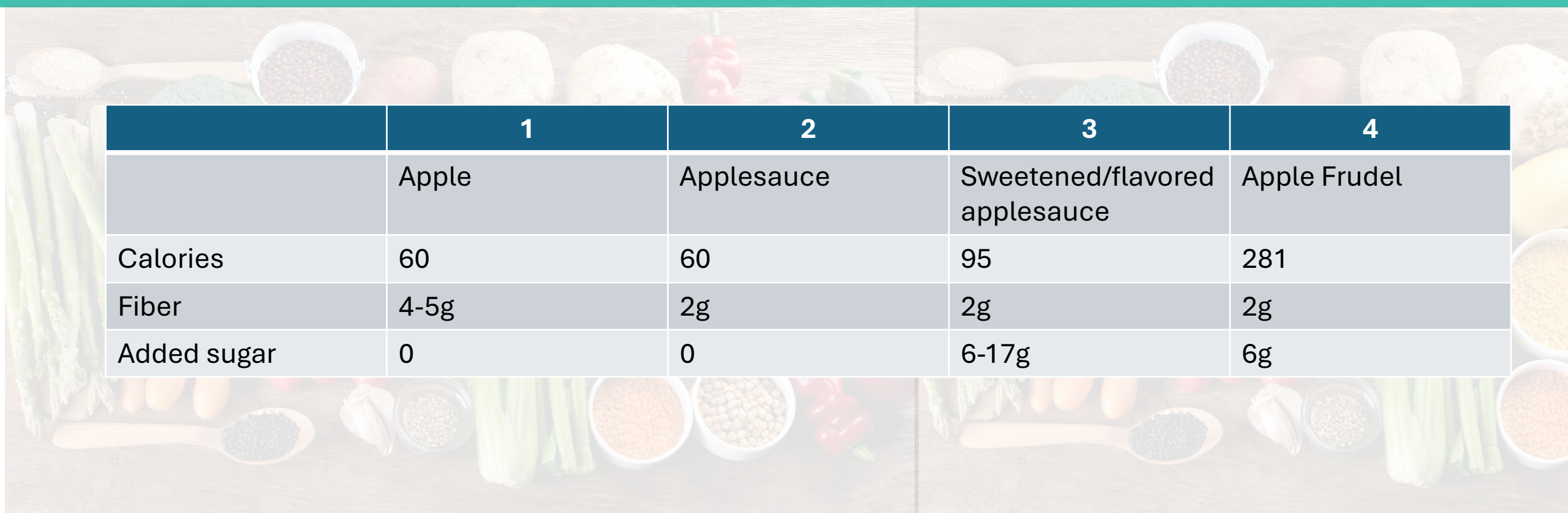
NATIONAL NUTRITION MONTH 2013
GET YOUR PLATE IN SHAPE

Choose **MyPlate**.gov

SIMPLY GOOD NUTRITION
by Oldemark

UPFs

NOVA 1 2 3 4



	1	2	3	4
	Apple	Applesauce	Sweetened/flavored applesauce	Apple Frudel
Calories	60	60	95	281
Fiber	4-5g	2g	2g	2g
Added sugar	0	0	6-17g	6g

How does your school measure up?

Figure 1. Spectrum of processing of school foods based on the NOVA classification*

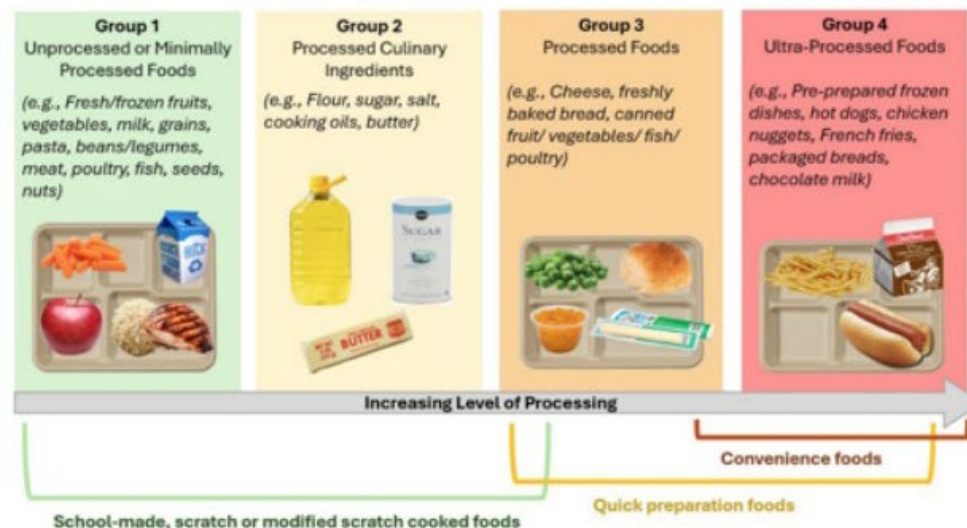


Image adapted from Crimarco et al. Definitions adapted from Monteiro et al.
Source: Cohen et al., 2025

In a 2025 survey of 1,226 school food authorities across 8 states:

- 25% offered convenience foods daily
- 52% offered convenience foods at least 3x/week
- 30% offered quick preparation foods daily
- 54% offered quick prep foods at least 3x/week
- 17% offered scratch/modified scratch cooked foods daily
- 44% offered scratch/modified scratch cooked foods at least 3x/week
- 3% offered scratch/modified scratch cooked foods exclusively

Source: Cohen et al., 2025

Dietary Guidelines



The U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (HHS) released the new guidelines on January 7, 2026, marking what they call a “historic reset” in federal nutrition policy, shifting focus back to “real food” and nutrient-dense choices.

The guidelines introduce a new inverted food pyramid, prioritizing high-quality protein (animal and plant), full-fat dairy, vegetables, fruits, healthy fats, and whole grains, while calling for dramatic reduction in highly processed foods.



Dietary Guidelines

Daily Servings by Calorie Level

	Calorie Level of Pattern	1000	1200	1400	1600	1800	2000	2200	2400	2600	2800	3000	3200
Food Group	Serving Size Examples	Daily Servings											
Protein Foods	3 oz cooked meat, poultry, or seafood; 1 egg; ½ cup beans, peas, or lentils; 1 oz nuts or seeds; 2 tbsp nut or seed butter; 3 oz soy	1–1 ½	1 ½–2	2–2 ½	2 ½–3 ½	2 ½–3 ½	3–4	3 ½–4 ½	3 ½–4 ½	3 ½–4 ½	4–5	4–5	4–5
Dairy	1 cup milk; ¾ cup yogurt; 1 oz cheese	2	2 ½	2 ½	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Vegetables	1 cup raw or cooked; 2 cups leafy greens	1 ¼	1 ¾	1 ¾	2 ½	3	3	3 ½	3 ½	4 ¼	4 ¼	4 ¾	4 ¾
Fruits	1 cup raw; ½ cup dried	1	1	1 ½	1 ½	1 ½	2	2	2	2	2 ½	2 ½	2 ½
Whole Grains	½ cup cooked oats, brown rice, barley, quinoa, or buckwheat; 1 slice bread; 1 tortilla	1–2	1 ½–2 ¾	1 ¾–3 ¼	1 ¾–3 ¼	2–4	2–4	2 ¼–4 ½	2 ¾–5 ¼	3–6	3 ¼–6 ½	3 ¼–6 ½	3 ¼–6 ½
Healthy Fats	1 tsp olive oil or butter	2 ½	2 ½	2 ½	3 ½	4	4 ½	4 ½	5	5 ½	6	7	8

- These serving sizes should align with the recommendations in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030*; therefore, a variety of foods should be selected from each food group. Foods are assumed to be nutrient-dense, with no or limited added sugars, refined carbohydrates, or chemical additives. Individual food choices within each food group vary in calorie and nutrient content per serving, so attention to portion sizes is important. Smaller portions may be appropriate for individuals with lower calorie needs, such as young children or some older adults. Healthy fats are naturally present in many whole foods, and small amounts may also be used when cooking with or adding fats to meals.
 - **Protein Foods:** Animal- and plant-based protein foods, including meat, poultry, eggs, seafood, beans, peas, lentils, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy.
 - **Dairy:** Whole, reduced-fat, low-fat, or nonfat dairy products, including fluid, dry, or evaporated milk; yogurt; and cheeses. Lactose-free and lactose-reduced products, as well as fortified dairy alternatives, are also options.
 - **Vegetables:** Vegetables of all types—dark green; red and orange; beans, peas, lentils, and legumes; starchy; and other vegetables, including fresh, frozen, and canned, cooked, or raw vegetables.
 - **Fruits:** Fruits of all types, including fresh, frozen, canned, juiced, and dried fruits.
 - **Whole Grains:** All whole-grain foods and products made with whole grains as ingredients.



Current Lunch Meal Pattern

Lunch Meal Pattern				
	Preschool	Grades K-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12
Food Components	Amount of Food per Week (minimum per day)			
Fruits (cups)	1½ (¾)	2½ (½)	2½ (½)	5 (1)
Vegetables (cups)	1½ (¾)	3¾ (¾)	3¾ (¾)	5 (1)
Dark Green	N/A	½	½	½
Red/Orange		¾	¾	1¼
Beans and Peas (Legumes)		½	½	½
Starchy		½	½	½
Other		½	½	¾
Additional Vegetables to Reach Total		1	1	1½
Grains (ounce equivalents (oz. eq.), unless otherwise indicated)	1 ¼ slices/servings (½ slice/serving) or 1¼ cup (¾ cup)	8-9 (1)	8-10 (1)	10-12 (2)
Meats/Meat Alternates (oz. eq.)	7½ (1½)	8-10 (1)	9-10 (1)	10-12 (2)
Fluid Milk (cups)	3¾ (¾)	5 (1)	5 (1)	5 (1)
Other Specifications: Daily Amount Based on the Average for a 5-Day Week				
Min-Max Calories (kcal)	N/A	550-650	600-700	750-850
Saturated Fat (% of total calories)	N/A	<10	<10	<10
Sodium Target 1 (mg) (through SY 2023-24)	N/A	≤1,230	≤1,360	≤1,420
Sodium Target 2 (mg) (effective July 1, 2024)		≤935	≤1,035	≤1,080
Trans Fat	N/A	Nutrition label or manufacturer specifications must indicate zero grams of <i>trans</i> fat per serving. (This does not apply to naturally occurring <i>trans</i> fats, present in some meat and dairy products.)		



Dietary Guidelines- What does that mean for schools?

Update to DGA

Added Sugars: no added sugars recommended for children through age 10; age 11+: no more than 10 grams of added sugars per meal.

- Snack foods should follow FDA "Healthy" claim limits for added sugars
- Dairy should have no added sugars

Protein: increase in recommended intake from 0.8 g/kg/day to 1.2 - 1.6 g/kg/day

Potential CNP Change

- No added sugars for programs serving children through age 10 (i.e., no flavored milk, yogurt, sweetened items, etc.)
- Per meal limits rather than weekly or product limits for ages 11+
- Updates to Smart Snacks (school competitive foods)
- Application of FDA "Healthy" definition to some foods

- Reclassification of how protein is "counted" in meal patterns

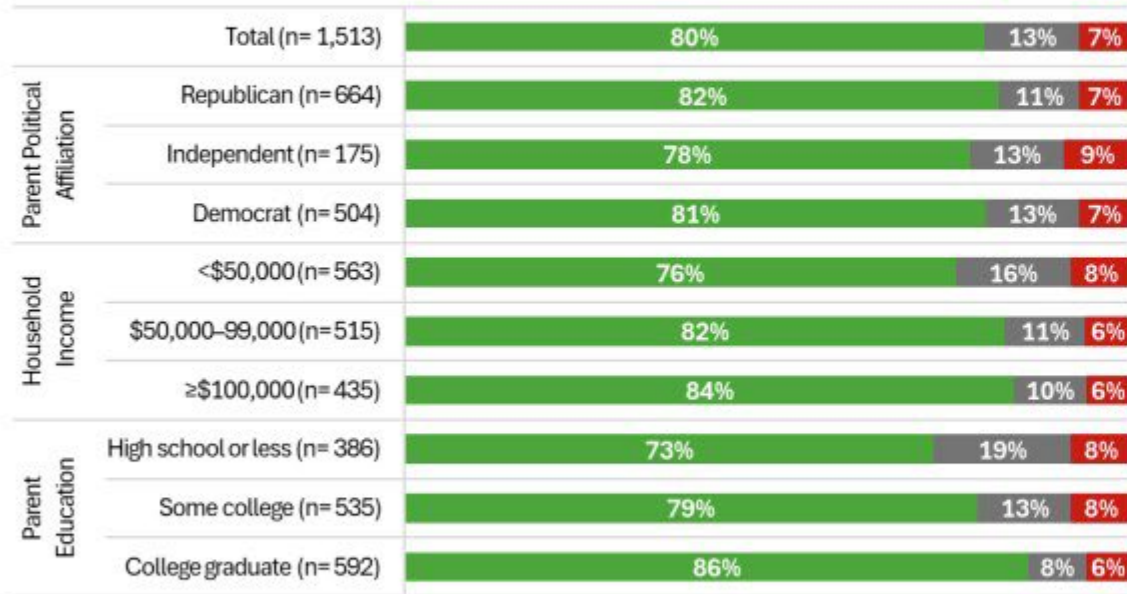
Dietary Guidelines- What does that mean for schools?

Update to DGA	Potential CNP Change
Saturated Fat & Dairy: emphasis on full-fat dairy, animal proteins with saturated fat; maintained 10% limit on kcal from saturated fat	• Allowance of full-fat dairy in all programs • Removal of weekly saturated fat limit or specific product exemptions for whole milk, whole-milk yogurt
Highly Processed Foods: avoid highly processed packaged and prepared foods that are salty or sweet. Limit artificial flavors, petroleum-based dyes, artificial preservatives, low-calories non-nutritive sweeteners.	• New processing criteria/limits • Bans on products with dyes, artificial preservatives, non-nutritive sweeteners
Vegetables: no inclusion of specific subgroup recommendations, such as dark green, red/orange, beans/peas/lentils	• Removal of 5 vegetable subgroups for school meals • Reduced variety of vegetables required

Community Support

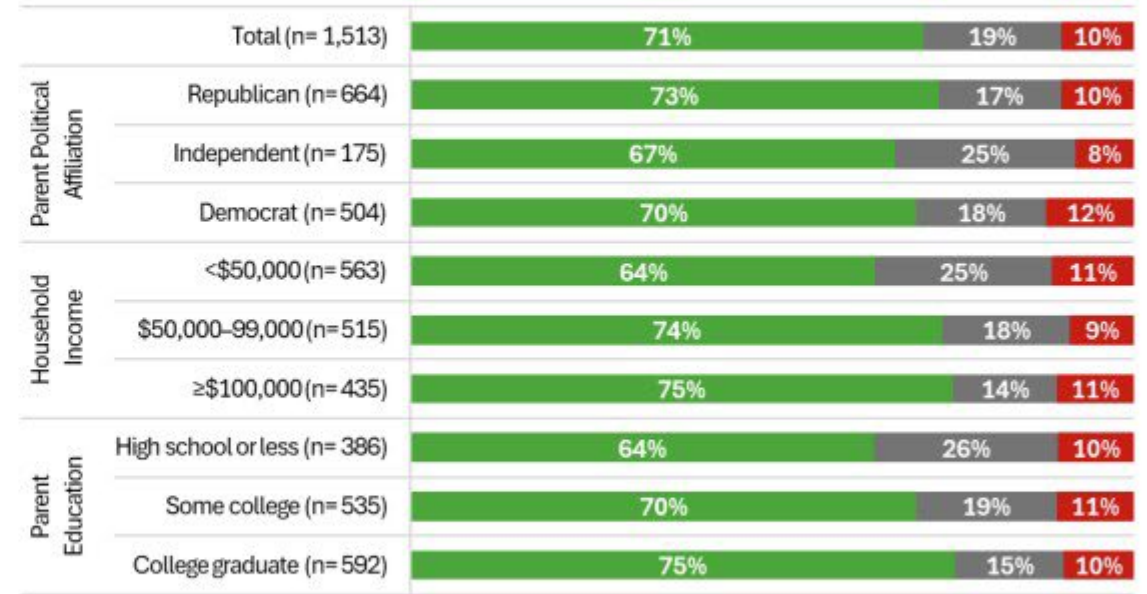
All foods with potentially harmful additives should be banned in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program

■ Agree (strongly and somewhat) ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree (strongly and somewhat)



All ultra-processed foods should be banned in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program

■ Agree (strongly and somewhat) ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree (strongly and somewhat)



Planning for the future

The best preparation right now is intentional progress, not perfection. Programs that focus on menu quality, staff training, and operational readiness will be in a strong position when USDA releases the next round of meal pattern updates.

1. Strengthen menu foundations
2. Get ahead on product review
3. Build staff knowledge & skills
4. Assess equipment and infrastructure
5. Communicate early with administration
6. Stay informed without becoming overwhelmed



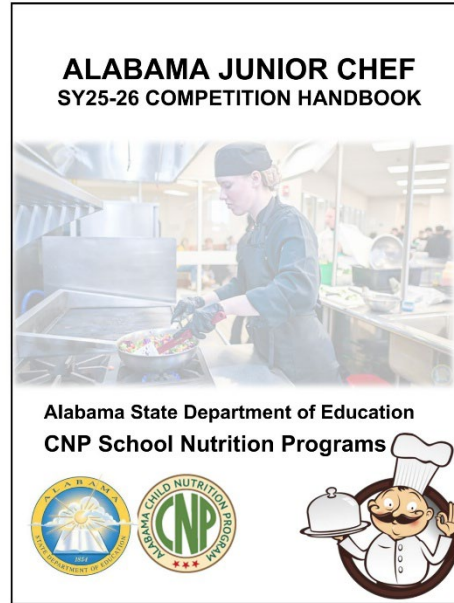
ALSDE School Program Partners

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Questions?

