***School Lunches Becoming Healthier, Statistics Indicate***

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WASHINGTON — The humble school lunch, that staple of most every American child’s diet, has become healthier.

That was the conclusion of a federal report released Thursday that showed that the nutritional profile of school meals in the United States had improved substantially since higher government standards went into effect in 2012.

Nearly 80 percent of schools offered two or more vegetables per meal in 2014, the data showed, up from 62 percent in 2000. Two or more fruits were offered in about 78 percent of schools, up from 68 percent in 2000. About a third of schools now have salad bars.

The big questions, of course, are whether students are eating these offerings, and, if so, whether that will help ease the [obesity](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/symptoms/morbid-obesity/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) epidemic among the nation’s children. Since the 1970s, the prevalence of childhood [obesity](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/symptoms/morbid-obesity/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) in the United States has more than tripled, raising the risk of [diabetes](http://health.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/diabetes/overview.html?inline=nyt-classifier) and cardiovascular problems.

But in recent years, health experts have documented small yet promising declines in the rate of childhood obesity, which was about 17 percent in 2012, the most recent year the government has measured. Obesity has decreased among the youngest children, as well as among children of low-income families participating in federal food programs.

Experts are hoping that better offerings in school lunches move the needle for other children too, though the report measured only offerings of food, not what children were actually eating. The federal health authorities say they plan to release obesity figures for 2014 later this year.

Students consume up to half their daily calories at school, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which released [the data](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6433a3.htm?s_cid=mm6433a3_w). Interviewers visited a nationally representative sample of schools in 2000, 2006 and 2014.

Mostly gone are the days of white bread and canned corn. Canned vegetables are still served, but in far fewer schools. More than half of schools that prepared meals on site used fresh or frozen vegetables instead. For those that still served canned vegetables, 52 percent used low-sodium varieties, up from 10 percent in 2000.

School food experts said the findings fit with what they had seen in districts across the country.

“Literally, the way the school lunch line looks is different,” said Deb Bentzel, senior associate at the Food Trust in Philadelphia, a nonprofit that works to increase access to nutritious food in schools and communities. “It’s brighter, it’s healthier-looking, it’s fresher.”

Traditional offerings have become healthier. For example, hot dogs have less fat and are made partly from turkey. A lunch tray is more likely to include legumes — “Beans and chickpeas, that sort of thing,” Ms. Bentzel said.

Even snacks, long problematic as calorie-boosters, have gotten better. For example, in the Philadelphia school district, potato chips are baked, not fried; beverages no longer include sweetened teas or sodas; and serving sizes are smaller — changes the district began implementing in 2004, years before the stricter school food rules took effect, said Amy Virus, the acting food service director for the district.

The rules, [detailed in 2012](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-01-26/pdf/2012-1010.pdf) by the Department of Agriculture based on a law that passed in 2010, have prompted broad changes in school menus across the United States. Although the law [passed with bipartisan support](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/03/us/politics/03child.html), its implementation has been [politically messier,](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/magazine/how-school-lunch-became-the-latest-political-battleground.html) and some of its core elements — such as reducing sodium in school food — have become targets of some Republican lawmakers.

[Margo Wootan,](http://www.cspinet.org/about/margo-wootan.html) director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said that with the law’s renewal up for review this fall, consumer groups were watching to guard against rollbacks of any major provisions.

The changes have been profound, she said.

“The improvement to school foods in the last three years is much more than had been done in the last three decades,” she said. “It is not the chicken à la king on white rice with mushy, canned green beans anymore.”

The hope is that changes in school food will lower obesity rates, though pinpointing the reasons for the recent declines has been hard. Philadelphia is one of the handful of cities where childhood obesity rates have declined. This month, [researchers reported that the decline had continued](http://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2015/15_0185.htm).

One criticism of the new meals has been that students were throwing away the healthier food, but Dr. Wootan said that problem is eternal in school cafeterias and had even improved slightly since the new rules took effect.

[A study in 12 urban schools](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/CHI-2015-0019-Schwartz_2P.pdf) released this year by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut found the proportion of students choosing a vegetable dropped to 52 percent in 2014 from 68 percent in 2012 but that students selecting vegetables ate nearly 20 percent more of them.

In Philadelphia, not all of the new foods have gone over well.

“Beans are our challenge,” Ms. Virus said. “We accept that. We are trying.”

And the notion that school lunches are simply bad has persisted.

“It’s very easy to make fun of school lunch — it’s horrible, it’s mystery meat,” she said. “But we’ve moved so far from that. The perception is the meal is lower-quality, but that’s simply not true.”