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U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue holds up his chocolate milk drink at Discovery Elementary School, in Arlington, VA, on October 18, 2018. USDA Photo by Lance Cheung/Flickr

Sonny Perdue's School Lunch Bait-and-Switch

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Last week, the Trump administration finalized a rule that will weaken nutrition standards governing what kids are served in the school lunch line. This rollback had been in works for more than a year—Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue first [signaled his intention](#) in May 2017, just weeks into his new job. But now, one key component of [the final rule](#) is different from what he proposed back then. And you probably won't be shocked to hear that it's worse, not better, for children's health.

If the Trump crowd stands for anything, it's [wiping out every visible trace](#) of the Obama legacy. So it isn't surprising that the former First Lady's signature achievement is a target. The [Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#) (HHFKA),

which Michelle Obama championed, ushered in new, science-based nutrition requirements for meals served in the nation's schools. It has also [roiled conservatives](#) and threatened Big Food's grip on what kids eat.

Enter Perdue's [2017 proposed rule change](#). To food industry [applause](#), it promised to make it easier for schools to get waivers from some of the law's requirements, including the mandate that all bread and other grain-based products served in schools be [whole grain rich](#), defined as containing at least 50 percent whole grains. Perdue's proposed rule also delayed the implementation of new low-sodium limits until after 2020 and allowed schools to serve low-fat flavored (i.e., sugar-sweetened) milk.

The Secretary's defended the move, telling reporters, "This is not reducing the nutritional standards whatsoever." (The non-partisan fact-checking site [PolitiFact disagreed](#).)

On whole grains, Perdue said one thing and did another

Since HHFKA rules first started ratcheting up the whole grain requirements in the 2012-2013 school year, schools in some places have reported difficulties finding sources of, say, whole grain [tortillas that are as pliable](#) as their white flour counterparts, or [biscuits](#) that bake up as fluffy. As proposed last year, Secretary Perdue's [rule change](#) would have extended the period in which schools that are struggling to meet the whole grain-rich standard could be granted waivers.

But instead, the final rule announced last week has done away with the need for whole grain waivers by relaxing the standard for all schools. That standard will now revert to [what it was in 2012](#), the very first year of the new HHFKA regulations, when only *half* the grain products offered in school lunch program had to be whole grain rich.

That was meant to be a first step toward 100 percent whole grain-rich menus, but

now it has become a fallback. And remember, because “whole grain-rich” products need only exceed 50 percent whole grains to be classified as such, weakening the standard by half means that *a lot* of processed, low-nutrient grains will end up on kids’ plates again.

And as my colleague Sarah Reinhardt [wrote on this blog](#) earlier this year, this move by the Trump administration could just be a first step in dismantling progress toward healthier school food and healthier kids.

Perdue is failing to follow the science

Secretary Perdue’s changes to established school food nutrition standards contradict the best available nutritional science and the 2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which explicitly recommend a healthy eating pattern that includes whole grains and limits added sugars, saturated fats, and sodium. (An aside: The next iteration of these usually-science-based guidelines is now also at risk at the hands of the Trump administration. [Read more here.](#))

Moreover, the school nutrition rollbacks threaten to increase an already serious threat to the nation’s health and its future. The [US childhood obesity rate tripled](#) between the early 1970s and 2005, prompting public [health researchers to suggest](#) that, for the first time in centuries, children may have shorter life expectancies than their parents. And while the childhood obesity rate appeared to plateau in recent years—due in part to smart policies like HHSFKA—obesity continues to affect [more than 18 percent of all children](#).

With all that’s at stake, I have to wonder why Secretary Perdue is rolling back these rules. It isn’t because large numbers of schools are asking. On the contrary, in 2016 [the USDA reported](#) that more than 99 percent of schools nationwide were meeting the new nutrition standards. But Perdue apparently believes that if any school can’t meet a standard, none of them should have to. Moreover, he’s willing to let children decide what they’ll be served in schools. To quote his [final rule](#)

notice:

“USDA acknowledges the significant efforts and progress these schools have achieved. However, the changes are only truly successful when all of America’s school children eat and enjoy the school meals.”

But here’s the thing: kids are kids, and they need to be taught to enjoy nutritious meals. They may never enjoy whole wheat bread as much as they like white bread. Or ice cream, for that matter. But this is school we’re talking about, and [healthy eating is kind of like math](#)—something kids need to do for their own good.

Of course, part of the job of school administrators and policymakers is to make such things as appealing as possible. There are lots of ways to teach kids that healthy food can be delicious—including fun school activities like [taste tests](#) and [cooking contests](#)—and they’re showing success. But these efforts need to be maintained and encouraged, consistently, through USDA policy. Because at the end of the day, we can’t abandon math *or* healthy food because kids say they don’t like them.

And while the USDA’s new rules for the current school year are a done deal, UCS and our allies will be looking for other ways to improve nutrition for the nation’s children, both inside and out of school. Our very future depends on it.

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