



News Release

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Contact

Jessica Christopher

jessicachristopher@curatorpr.com

610-945-8615 (PT)

Scratch Cooking is the Vehicle for Schools to Meet USDA's New School Meal Standards & Achieve Better Nutrition for Our Students

Boulder, CO – The [Chef Ann Foundation](#), a national nonprofit dedicated to promoting whole-ingredient, scratch cooking in schools, sees [today's announcement](#) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) updating the national school nutrition standards as a step in the right direction. The updated standards will improve the quality of school meals and support the health of students while reinforcing scratch cooking as the tool for schools to achieve results.

“Today’s announcement from USDA is progress in ensuring that our school meals are as nutritious as possible for our kids while providing school food programs a pathway for success,” **said Chef Ann Foundation Chief Executive Officer Mara Fleishman**. “Scratch cooking is the vehicle of change for school food programs to accomplish a variety of outcomes that we all strive for – from more locally sourced, environmentally conscious meals, to delicious recipes that meet the new guidelines. We look forward to continuing to work with USDA to further strengthen school nutrition and help schools meet this moment.”

What’s in the Rule?

The [final rule](#) released today creates a limit on added sugars for the first time in the history of school nutrition. It also gradually implements a 15% sodium reduction for lunch and 10% sodium reduction for breakfast beyond current limits. The rule also includes provisions that support the school food workforce and encourage local procurement – both key components of a scratch-cooked school food program – while providing more flexibility for school food operators to incorporate meat and meat alternatives within school breakfast.

The historic added sugar limits and targeted sodium reduction represent a step in the right direction toward encouraging healthier eating habits and preventing diet-related diseases among students. However, the Chef Ann Foundation remains strongly opposed to offering students any flavored milk in schools, whether fat free or 1%, due to its high added sugar content. We urge the USDA to continue to shift toward serving only unflavored milk in schools.

Included in today's announcement is a final proposal allowing schools the flexibility to offer grains, meats and meat alternates, or a combination of both for school breakfast. This change means that schools will be able to further prioritize including protein within school breakfast – allowing students to access a steady source of energy to start their day – while encouraging school food operators to use scratch cooking to instill more creativity with their menu planning.

Also incorporated in today's rule are significant changes to the professional standards for school food operators. The new hiring flexibilities will allow more professionals who have dedicated their careers to improving child nutrition and hold practical, hands-on experience – but not certain academic credentials – to lead school food programs. With the [staffing shortages](#) that continue to hinder school food departments across the country, now is the time to support workforce [solutions](#) to grow the pipeline of school food professionals with scratch cooking skills.

Additionally, the modifications to the Buy American and Geographic Preference provisions will encourage schools to procure more locally grown and produced foods, a key element of scratch cooking and supporting local communities. The phased-in cap on non-domestic food purchases supports local farmers and producers while recognizing the practical challenges schools may face with local procurement. The expansion of Geographic Preference options will help foster stronger connections between schools and local food producers. Our team of school food operators will continue to provide technical assistance to schools to support their local procurement efforts through this updated process.

Scratch Cooking and Meeting the New Guidelines

The Chef Ann Foundation's work helping school districts across the country meet their goal of increasing scratch cooking is a roadmap for school food programs to meet the new USDA guidelines. Scratch cooking allows school food professionals to better control what goes into meals,

offering the opportunity to reduce sodium and sugar, as well as add flavor using spices and cooking techniques – all while creating delicious meals that students love.

“Scratch cooking lets school food operators maintain full control over their ingredients,” **said Chef Ann Foundation Executive Director of Operations Lori Nelson.** “For example, USDA’s new guidelines for meat and meat alternates at breakfast gives schools the opportunity to use scratch cooking to reimagine their menu and prioritize protein offerings, like serving our [Sheet Pan Eggs with Veggies](#) versus a sugary, grain-based muffin. Starting the day with protein ensures students have a steady energy source and sets a positive tone for the day. Whether you’re serving 1,000 meals a day or 100, we’re here to help show folks the roadmap for how to incorporate more whole-ingredient cooking into their menus using locally sourced products to create meals students will love.”

Some of the Chef Ann Foundation’s most popular recipes on [The Lunch Box](#) – a free, online scratch cooking resource library for school food professionals – already meet the updated USDA guidelines, including [Baked Ziti](#), [Mac and Cheese](#), and [Breakfast Energy Bites](#). We are working diligently to review and update our recipes to comply with the new guidelines as we prepare for them to go into effect this fall and beyond.

Looking Ahead

Today’s final rule from USDA encourages progress for school food programs across the country as they support the health and wellbeing of students. We urge schools to utilize scratch cooking as the vehicle to meet these new guidelines and improve child nutrition. We thank USDA for their tireless efforts throughout this process and look forward to our continued [partnership](#) as we work to make school food fresher, healthier, and more sustainable. The Chef Ann Foundation will continue to provide school food professionals across the country with the tools that they need to champion the future of scratch cooking in schools, the strength of local economies, and ultimately, healthier futures for our students and planet.

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About Chef Ann Foundation

[Chef Ann Foundation](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit working to ensure that school food professionals have the resources, funding, and support they need to provide fresh, healthy, delicious, scratch cooked

meals that support the health of children and our planet. To date, the organization has reached more than 14,000 schools and 3.4 million kids with healthy school programming. Learn more on our [website](#) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [X](#), and [LinkedIn](#).