

Study finds federal school lunches linked to childhood obesity

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With children going back to school, parents are concerned that their youngsters are staying fit and eating right, especially those who dine in a school cafeteria.

New research funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture finds that children who eat school lunches that are part of the federal government's National School Lunch Program are more likely to become overweight.

The same research study found, however, that children who eat both the breakfast and lunch sponsored by the federal government are less heavy than children who don't participate in either, and than children who eat only the lunch, says economist Daniel L. Millimet at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

Millimet authored the study with economists Rusty Tchernis, Georgia State University, and Muna S. Hussain, Kuwait University.

"The fact that federally funded school lunches contribute to the childhood obesity epidemic is disconcerting, although not altogether surprising," said Millimet, whose research expertise is the economics of children, specifically topics related to schooling and health.

The new study was published in the Summer issue of *The Journal of Human Resources*. It is titled "[School Nutrition Programs and the Incidence of Childhood Obesity](#)."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture oversees the federal lunch and breakfast programs. Through USDA the federal government reimburses schools for a portion of school lunch costs and also donates surplus agricultural food items. While USDA does require that the meals meet certain nutritional standards, schools choose the specific foods.

A la carte items outside the guidelines

Schools also can serve individual food items a la carte, which fall outside the scope of the federal guidelines and allow students to choose additional foods.

For their study, the researchers analyzed data on more than 13,500 elementary school students. Students were interviewed in kindergarten, first and third grades, and then again in later grades.

"First, it is very difficult to plan healthy but inviting school lunches at a low price," Millimet said. "Second, given the tight budgets faced by many school districts, funding from the sales of a la carte lunch items receives high priority. That said, it's comforting to know that the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the federal school nutrition

programs, takes the issue very seriously. The USDA sponsors not only my research, but that of others as well, to investigate the issues and possible solutions."

The USDA is partnering with First Lady Michelle Obama to fight what experts say is a childhood [obesity epidemic](#) among America's school children. The First Lady on May 18 released the results and recommendations of The White House Task Force on [Childhood Obesity](#) report, which said that more than 30 percent of American children ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese. The report recommends serving healthier foods in schools.

Lunches may not be in compliance

Judging from the results of the study, Millimet said, the food being served in school lunches may not maintain a healthy weight in children. The food in school breakfasts appears to be healthier, however.

"Technically what is going on is that the federal government establishes nutrition guidelines for lunches and breakfasts if schools wish to receive federal funding," Millimet said. "But there's evidence that school lunches are less in compliance with these guidelines than breakfasts. The other possible issue is that these days schools try to make money from a la carte items at lunch. And it's possible that even if the school lunch is healthy, kids buying lunch are more likely to tack on extra items that are not healthy."

Nutritionists strongly advocate eating breakfast for a healthy lifestyle, Millimet said, noting that — up to a point — any breakfast is better than no breakfast.

The National Student Lunch Program supplies meals to about 30 million children in 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools, according to

the USDA.

The School Breakfast Program gives cash assistance to more than 80,000 schools for about 10 million children.

Obesity among students takes jump

The study cites data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey taken between 1971 and 1974 and again from 2003 to 2004 that found the prevalence of overweight preschool children ages 2-5 jumped from 5 percent to 13.9 percent. Among school-aged children, it jumped from 4 percent to 18.8 percent for [children](#) 6-11; and 6.1 percent to 17.4 percent for those 12-19.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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