

Another food fight? Congress mulls school meal standards (Update)

September 18 2015, by Mary Clare Jalonick



In this April 29, 2014, file photo, fruit and vegetables are served during lunch at the Patrick Henry Elementary School in Alexandria, Va. Congress will have to decide soon whether it wants another food fight with first lady Michelle Obama and the administration over what's served in the school lunch line. School food rules pitted Republicans seeking full exemptions for some schools against Obama in 2014, with the first lady declaring she'd fight "to the bitter end" to make sure kids have good nutrition. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

Congress is deciding whether it wants another pitched battle with first lady Michelle Obama and the administration over school lunches that put more whole grains in kids' meals and cut salty foods.

Last year, school food rules pitted Mrs. Obama against Republicans seeking full exemptions for some schools. The first lady declared that she would fight "to the bitter end" to make sure kids have good nutrition.

Lawmakers are now hoping to find bipartisan compromise on the rules and also dollars for the nation's child nutrition programs before the law expires Sept. 30. So far, however, negotiations have failed to produce a bill in either the House or the Senate.

Lawmakers may not seek an immediate extension if the law expires. The school foods rules won't change unless Congress takes action, and the Agriculture Department says other programs would continue to operate as long as Congress passes a budget this fall.

The rules phased in since 2012 set fat, calorie, sugar, grain and sodium limits on foods in the lunch line and beyond. Schools have long been required to follow government nutrition rules if they accept federal reimbursements for free and reduced-price meals for low-income students, but the new standards are stricter.

While many schools have had success putting the rules in place, many Republicans say the standards have posed too many challenges for school nutrition officials who must balance serving healthy foods with keeping participation up in their programs.

The School Nutrition Association, a group of school nutrition directors, has pushed Congress to ease the whole grain and sodium standards and eliminate the stipulation that all children buying a full lunch take a fruit or vegetable. They are also seeking a higher federal reimbursement rate.

Democrats, including Mrs. Obama, would like to leave the standards alone and argue that they are working.

Beyond school lunch, child nutrition programs expiring at the end of the month include the Agriculture Department's Women, Infants and Children program for new and expecting mothers and their children, summer feeding programs and other government institutional food aid.

Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, is negotiating with the panel's top Democrat, Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, to get a bipartisan bill. He said this week that changes to the sodium standards are a priority.

The 2012 standards already lowered salt levels in school meals, with even lower sodium levels set to start in two years. Some schools have said they will have to take many popular items off their menus if the 2017 levels go into effect.

Jessica Shelly, food service director at Cincinnati's urban public schools, says the new standards would mean she couldn't serve soy sauce or hot sauce with some items, condiments that have helped her get kids to eat healthier foods like greens.

"We need to take care of that," Roberts said of the upcoming sodium rules. "You are serving kids food that some people would like to mandate that they eat, but they are simply not eating it."

After a GOP bid to let some schools have a one-year exemption from the standards failed last year, Congress passed legislation that would allow schools to temporarily request waivers from some of the whole grain requirements and put off the 2017 sodium standards until further study proved those reductions are needed. The Senate bill could make those changes permanent.

Stabenow seems unwilling to go along with that, saying Congress has already compromised. She says she wants to depoliticize school meals.

Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, is also negotiating a bill and has signaled he wants changes. But that panel has not given a timeline for any action.

Democrats are hoping time is on their side as students, school officials and food companies have now had three years to adjust to the healthier food standards. The administration has been working with schools to make sure they can put the rules in place successfully.

"That message is beginning to penetrate and resonate," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in an interview. "It's a different climate."

Mrs. Obama has continued to champion the standards' success, but she has tempered her tone somewhat as Congress works on the issue.

"We all need to work together on this issue, because we know that issues like child nutrition, it's not about politics," she said at an event this week. "This is about giving our children a fair shot in life."

As Congress decides what to do, school officials want a resolution. Sal Valenza, food service director for West New York, New Jersey, says he supports most of the rules but believes the upcoming sodium standards are too restrictive. Most of all, though, he wants more certainty as he plans his schools' meals.

"I would like it to stop being a debate," he said.

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