

Senate panel approves bill to make school lunches tastier

January 20 2016, by Mary Clare Jalonick



Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, right, talks with the committee's ranking member Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2016, before the whole panel voted to approve new measures to set fat, sugar and sodium limits in school lunches. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

School meals could become a bit tastier under legislation approved by a Senate committee.

The bipartisan measure approved by a voice vote Wednesday is designed to help schools that say the Obama administration's healthier meal rules are too restrictive. Leaders of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee introduced the legislation Monday after negotiating an agreement to ease requirements for whole grains and delaying a deadline to cut sodium levels.

School lunch directors who have lobbied against the standards endorsed the deal, saying it would help them plan meals that are more appealing to students. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has backed it as well, saying the compromise maintains most of the healthier school meal rules that have been phased in since 2012.

The rules set fat, sugar and sodium limits on foods in the lunch line and beyond. They require more whole grains, fruits and vegetables. 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.



Senate Agriculture Committee members Sen. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., left, and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., confer on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2016, as the committee met to approve new measures to set fat, sugar and sodium limits in school lunches. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

The School Nutrition Association, which represents school nutrition directors and companies that sell food to schools, has said many of the standards are unworkable and lobbied to roll them back.

The compromise signals a truce between first lady Michelle Obama and congressional Republicans who have been at odds over the rules for more than two years. She has highlighted the standards as part of her campaign against childhood obesity and said she would fight "to the bitter end" to keep them intact.

After the vote, the committee chairman, Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., and

Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow, the panel's top Democrat, said they were talking to Senate leaders and House members to try and get the bill passed soon in both chambers. The House has not yet introduced a bill.

"We've set the stage for doing this as quickly as possible," Stabenow said.



Senate Agriculture Committee members Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., with Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, left, joins other members of the committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2016, as the panel approved new measures to set fat, sugar and sodium limits in school lunches. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

The five-year legislation would direct the Agriculture Department to revise the whole grain and sodium standards within 90 days of the bill's enactment, meaning the new rules could be in place by next school year

if Congress acted quickly.

The bill does not spell out what changes would be made, but all parties—including USDA and the School Nutrition Association—have agreed that the department will write rules that scale back the whole grain standards to require that 80 percent of grains on the lunch line must be whole grain rich, or more than half whole grain.

Currently, all grains are required to be whole grain rich, though Congress has allowed some schools to apply for waivers from that requirement. Some school nutrition directors have said they have a hard time finding whole grain pastas, biscuits, grits and tortillas that kids will eat.

The agreement would delay stricter standards on sodium that are scheduled for the 2017 school year. Those standards would go into effect in 2019, and a study would measure the benefits of the reductions. Some schools have said they will have to take popular foods off the lunch line once the standards go into place.

The legislation would require the government to figure out ways to reduce waste of fruits and vegetables and put more resources into summer feeding programs.

Despite the bipartisan Senate agreement, not everyone is ready for compromise.

GOP presidential candidate Chris Christie said Monday that the first lady has "no business" being involved in school meals. The New Jersey governor, who has been public about his own struggles with weight, said it's "just another example of how the Obamas believe that they've got a better answer for everything than you do."

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