



# School Meals: Kids Are Sweeter with Less Sugar

Policy Brief • April 2021

## OUR STUDY

During the COVID-19 pandemic our study team investigated barriers and facilitators to healthy school meals in San Joaquin Valley, California, districts participating in the National School Lunch Program.

Through a series of parent focus groups, we learned that parents were concerned about the freshness and nutritional quality of meals being provided, particularly the sugar content. Parents then participated in a PhotoVoice project to document meals received over the course of one week. This brief highlights preliminary findings.

## SUGAR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans state, “A healthy dietary pattern limits added sugars to less than 10% of calories per day.”<sup>1</sup>

The American Heart Association and American Academy of Pediatrics recommend no more than 25 grams (6 tsp) of added sugar per day for children aged 2 and over.<sup>2</sup>

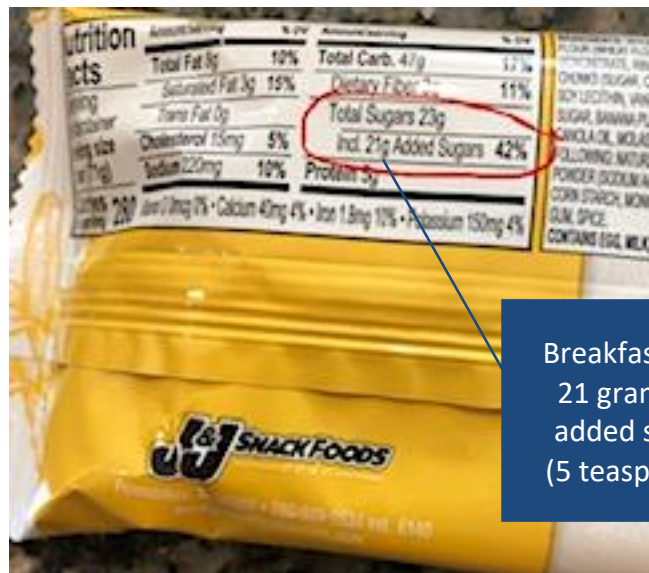
## NSLP SUGAR STANDARDS

None. USDA anticipated that maximum calorie levels set in 2012 would effectively restrict added sugars. Nonetheless, school meals are typically high in sugar.<sup>3</sup>

## WHY DOES SUGAR MATTER?

Children who consume too much added sugar are at increased risk of excess weight gain, hypertension and elevated blood lipids, all of which are risk factors for cardiovascular disease.<sup>4</sup> Sugar is a top contributor to children’s dental caries, and is the strongest risk that can be modified.<sup>5</sup>

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 has made schools the single overall healthiest source of eating in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> Yet, there remains one component without a USDA standard, added sugars – despite the fact that the Act “requires that school meals reflect the latest ‘Dietary Guidelines for Americans’.”<sup>7</sup>



Breakfast bar:  
21 grams of  
added sugar  
(5 teaspoons)

## Parent Quotes

“Children cannot sustain themselves on treats that give pure sugar, that they give for the morning (Pop Tarts) and bars and cereal that are full of sugar. They give with the best intentions, but less food would be better, but better quality and healthier.”

“The chocolate milk is not good because of the high sugar and the coloring of the milk.”

“I think they need to value the nutrition of the kids so that they eat it, and the children are healthier. I think it should be foods that they like but are balanced with good choices. I think 2% milk without the chocolate one.”

## Parent Photo Documentation of Meals



Chocolate milk:  
7 grams of  
added sugar  
(1.4 teaspoons)



## Policy Recommendation: Direct USDA to implement a standard for added sugars that aligns with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> US Department of Agriculture and US Department of Health and Human Services. Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Dec. 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Vos MB, Kaar JL, Welsh JA, Horn LV, Feig DI, et al. (2017). Added Sugars and Cardiovascular Disease Risk in Children: A Scientific Statement From the American Heart Association. *Circulation*, 135(19).
- <sup>3</sup> Fox MK, Gearan EC, Schwartz C. Added Sugars in School Meals and the Diets of School-Age Children. *Nutrients*. 2021; 13(2):471.
- <sup>4</sup> Vos op. cit.
- <sup>5</sup> Chi DL, Scott JM. Added Sugar and Dental Caries in Children: A Scientific Update and Future Steps. *Dent Clin N Am*. 2019; 63:17-33.
- <sup>6</sup> Liu J, Micha R, Li Y, Mozaffarian D. Trends in Food Sources and Diet Quality Among US Children and Adults, 2003-2018. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(4):e215262.
- <sup>7</sup> USDA FNS Nutrition Standards in NSLP and SBP; Final Rule. *Fed Regis*. 2012 Jan 26; 77(17):4088-167.