Added Sugars

Background

The 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) recommend avoiding added sugars throughout infancy and early childhood and establish quantitative limits for older children and adults. The Guidelines also place a broader emphasis on reducing highly processed foods (yet to be defined), refined carbohydrates (which can provide important sources of nutrient enrichment), and foods with added sugars (which, in moderation, can support consumption of nutrient dense foods, like dairy products). For children, the Guidelines recommend no added sugars through age 10, representing a significant departure from previous guidance that advised avoiding added sugars only through age 2 and limiting added sugars to less than 10 percent of calories thereafter. Of note, this recommendation does not align with the Scientific Foundations Report that accompanied the release of the DGA and lacks real-world feasibility. For individuals age 11 and older, the Guidelines recommend limiting added sugars to no more than 10 grams per meal.

School meal programs are currently in the middle of implementing added sugar limits. Product-specific limits on breakfast cereals, yogurt, and flavored milk began phasing in with the 2025–26 school year, and a weekly limit of less than 10 percent of calories from added sugars across the school week is scheduled to take effect in the 2027–28 school year. Programs are managing this transition now, and the anticipated rule would layer additional requirements on top of standards not yet fully implemented. Any standards that are implemented in regard to added sugars need to be science-based, feasible, achievable, and should not be layered on top of standards that are still in the process of implementation or restrict/eliminate entire categories of foods.

Concerns: What Members are Saying

Market readiness and supplier participation	“Every time a standard changes, manufacturers have to go back through research and development, product testing, labeling changes, and production. Those reformulation timelines are outside of a school district's control, and it's not realistic to expect products to appear overnight.” “We can be willing to serve the product, but if manufacturers need several years to reformulate and get it into production, we simply have to wait. The timing is driven by the food industry, not by school meal operators.” “The K-12 market is only a small portion of many manufacturers' business. If reformulating a product isn't financially worthwhile, some suppliers may choose not to do it at all and could exit the market instead, leaving schools with fewer options.”
Product composition and substitutions	“My concern isn't just reducing sugar. It's what replaces it. If manufacturers are removing added sugar, we need to understand what ingredients are being substituted and whether those alternatives have been fully evaluated.” “We fought for reduced sugar dairy products and now they may need to have no added sugar. Kids will not eat these items and we rely on their participation.”
Calculation, tools and staffing capacity	“Meeting a weekly added sugar standard requires menu planning software, detailed product nutrition data, and staff time to continuously monitor compliance. Many school meal programs do not have the tools, staffing, or resources needed to manage that level of oversight.”
Breakfast operations and menu feasibility	“Breakfast is where these changes hit the hardest. Our program relies on grain-based, packaged items that work for grab-and-go service and breakfast in the classroom, and those products are already some of the most difficult items for us to source consistently.”