

Smart Snacks



Background

The release of the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) in January 2026 signaled a shift in federal nutrition policy. The Guidelines serve as an important policy foundation because federal child nutrition programs are legally required to align with them, which they currently do with an average HEI score of 80. The expectation is that the newly released DGAs will shape a new round of USDA school meal regulations. One area expected to receive particular attention is Smart Snacks. These standards apply to foods sold outside the reimbursable school meal programs during the school day, including a la carte sales, school stores, vending machines, and snack bars. Established under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, Smart Snacks set nutrition criteria for foods sold to students **and provide a critical source of revenue that helps school nutrition programs offset labor and operating costs.**

Concerns: What members are saying

Loss of critical revenue	"People assume Smart Snacks are just extra revenue, but for many of us they're helping pay for equipment, staffing, training, and the day-to-day costs of running the program. If those sales go away, we don't have another funding source waiting to replace them." "We're already trying to keep up with rising food and labor costs. Smart Snacks help us make the numbers work. Without that revenue, we'd be looking at difficult decisions about staffing, equipment purchases, and other program investments."
Supports student participation & access	"Students aren't always buying Smart Snacks instead of meals. A lot of them are using those options to supplement what they're already eating, especially athletes and older students who need something before practice, after school, or later in the day." "The items students know and recognize help bring them into the cafeteria and keep them engaged in the program. Once they're there, they're more likely to participate in school meals and stay on campus rather than looking elsewhere for food."
Reduced participation, increased costs	"If we're required to replace the products students are actually buying with options that cost more and sell less, we're getting hit from both directions. Our costs go up, our sales go down, and participation is likely to follow."
Student acceptance & operational challenges	"I understand the goal, but I don't see students choosing hard-boiled eggs the same way they choose chips, cookies, or beverages. We also have to think about allergens, shelf life, food safety, and whether the item is something students will actually eat before we invest the time and money to offer it."
Unintended shift to off-campus purchases	"If we stop selling the products students are choosing today, they're not necessarily going to stop buying them. They'll go to the gas station, convenience store, school store, or bring them from home, and then we've lost both the revenue and the opportunity to provide a regulated snack option." "My concern is that we would be limiting options that meet federal standards, while students simply purchase alternatives somewhere else. I'm not sure that improves nutrition outcomes, but it does make it harder for schools to keep students engaged in the meal program."