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The New, Healthier School-Meals Standards Work Well

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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-healthier-school-meals-standards-work-well-1435250752>

Regarding Julie Kelly and Jeff Stier's "[The School Lunch Program With an Unappetizing Report Card](#)" (op-ed, June 18): The authors fail to mention in their vilification of the law's community-eligibility provision that it actually only applies to schools in high-poverty areas. Schools with high numbers of low-income children can offer free, nutritious school meals to all students through the national school lunch and breakfast programs, thereby reducing onerous paperwork for families, increasing access to school meals and reducing the stigma associated with receiving a free breakfast or lunch.

The community-eligibility provision has resulted in significantly higher national school lunch and breakfast participation, which increases federal revenue for schools and makes students more ready to learn. More than 95% of public schools comply with the new standards set forth in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

The authors also characterize school meals as wasteful and unappetizing. Not true. A 2014 Harvard School of Public Health study found that the school-meals standards led to increased fruit and vegetable consumption. Another study issued this month from the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut found that students consumed more fruit and threw away less entrees and vegetables thanks to the new standards, with a net effect of lowering food waste.

Changing behaviors at home isn't enough. Children typically consume up to half of their daily calories in school, and for some children the only food they eat each day comes from the federal school-meals program. Our children deserve the best possible chance at success, and that means having access to healthy meals in school.

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The School Lunch Program With an Unappetizing Report Card

The first lady's project is plagued by complaints of inedible meals, wasted food and misspent funds.

By

Julie Kelly And Jeff Stier

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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-school-lunch-program-with-an-unappetizing-report-card-1434582719>

Nearly five years after passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, mounting evidence suggests that the law may not be achieving either end. The well-intentioned signature policy of first lady Michelle Obama is an attempt to stem childhood obesity and hunger by providing healthier school meals. But as Congress prepares to reauthorize the program, which expires in September, lawmakers are sharpening their knives to address complaints of inedible meals, food waste and misspent funds.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act funds a number of child-nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program, which costs \$12 billion a year—plus \$3 billion for breakfast programs—and serves nearly 32 million children, about 45% of the total U.S. youth population.

Even though lunches are “free,” they are so unappetizing thanks to new nutrition standards that much food is thrown away. “It is horrible,” one inner-city principal, responsible for 1,200 students and 10,000 meals a week, told us. “It is just heartbreaking how much food is thrown away.”

So the students go hungry most of the day, until after school when enterprising vendors sell items like pork rinds, hot chips, or fresh corn mixed with cheese and mayonnaise from food carts outside of the school. Students don't eat the free, healthy meals at school, remain hungry during the day, then flock to purchase the unhealthy foods the school lunches aim to replace.

The program also wastes money. One largely unknown provision allows entire school districts, rather than individual families, to apply for free meals. For instance, all of Chicago's 400,000 public-school students receive free breakfast, lunch and a snack regardless of financial need.

At a House subcommittee hearing last month, an official with the USDA's Office of Inspector General testified that the National School Lunch Program has "high rates of improper payments." Sen. John Thune (R., S.D.) has pegged the waste in the billions of dollars. Mr. Thune said at a Senate hearing that there is a "legitimate need for food assistance, especially for the most vulnerable" but said that improper payments cost taxpayers \$2.7 billion in the last school year. "We can put this money to better use" within the program, he said.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act also funds costly attempts to keep up with the latest food trends. Some school districts are buying fancy trucks to deliver free food to students all summer. Minneapolis public schools dispatch food trucks to stalk kids at area parks to deliver carrots. Bertrand Weber, the school-district's nutrition director, is seeking more than \$6 million to bring the program to the entire district.

Farm-to-table is also fashionable, so the Agriculture Department is following with farm-to-school policies. Grants are available to "connect school cafeterias with local farmers and ranchers." One project in Tift County, Ga., includes "retrofitting a school bus to serve as a farm bus/rolling classroom and retrofitting a canning plant to preserve local tomatoes."

How's all this working out? There has not been a significant decline in childhood obesity rates since 2010, and some data show obesity going up. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, five states had childhood obesity rates from 15%-19% in 2009. In 2013 eight states had rates that high.

Childhood obesity is a major health threat that must be addressed, particularly at home. But questions remain whether these federal policies are achieving anything except creating bloated waistlines and budgets. Feeding children food they don't want while supervising every bite fosters defiance among students and an inability to make choices for themselves. As Kansas school-nutrition official Cindy Jones testified at the Senate hearing, "forcing students to take fruits and vegetables turns a healthy choice into a negative experience. Encourage and educate, instead of require, is always the best option."

Sadly, the program may be causing the very ailments it seeks to cure. As Friedrich von Hayek asked, "Is there a greater tragedy imaginable than," when trying to do good, "we should in fact unwittingly produce the very opposite of what we have been striving for?"

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