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School Programs Branch
Policy and Program Development Division
Food and Nutrition Service
1320 Braddock Place, 4th Floor
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Re: Docket No. FNS-2019-0007; Simplifying Meal Service and Monitoring Requirements in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing on behalf of Prevention Institute to express our strong opposition to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) “Simplifying Meal Service and Monitoring Requirements in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs” proposed rule (85 FR 4094). If implemented, this rule would undermine efforts to improve the quality and nutritional value of foods served in schools and could disproportionately harm lower-resourced schools and those serving predominantly students of color.

Prevention Institute is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting health, safety, and wellbeing through thriving, equitable communities. While healthy food is vital to health and wellbeing, not all children live in communities where they can enjoy easy access to affordable, nutritious food. With children consuming one-third to one-half of their daily calories during the school day,¹ the quality of school meals therefore plays a significant role in combating hunger and improving nutrition. By decreasing the overall healthfulness of school meals, the proposed rule would therefore jeopardize the progress schools are making to provide healthier food to all children, especially children of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.

The 2012 school nutrition standards are based on sound science and reflect the 2010-2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA),² which are further confirmed by the 2015-2020 DGA and the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (formerly, Institute of Medicine) 2009 report School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children.³ Virtually all schools (99 percent) participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) have made and are making great progress toward serving healthier meals for participating children with less sodium; more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables; and fewer sugary drinks and unhealthy snacks.⁴ USDA’s 2019 School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, which gathered data from more than 1,200 schools nationwide – the most comprehensive study on the updated standards to date – found that the nutritional quality of school

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lunches and breakfasts, measured by the HEI-2010 [Healthy Eating Index] scores, increased by 41 percent and 44 percent, respectively, between school years 2009-10 and 2014-15. Additional studies have documented the efficacy of the updated nutrition standards. A Healthy Eating Research study examining 1.7 million meals served in six schools in an urban Washington school district found that the overall nutritional quality of meals increased by 29 percent under the healthier 2012 standards. A study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity examined 12 middle schools in an urban, low-income school district and found that more students chose fruit after the healthier standards went into effect and students ate more of their vegetables and lunch entrées.

The proposed rule fails to put children’s health first, which is the clear goal of school nutrition programs under statute. If finalized, this rule would decrease school meal participation by encouraging a la carte purchases, which is both a fiscal risk to school meal programs and a health equity and racial justice concern. Moreover, the proposal would allow less fruit and less variety of vegetables, which likely would result in replacing them with starchy vegetables, such as potatoes, which children already overconsume. For example, the combined changes would allow children to consume foods that are higher in sodium, saturated fat, and refined grains, and consume an additional eight cups of hash browns, tater tots, French fries or other potatoes in place of fruit in breakfast and other vegetables in lunch per child per week.

USDA purports that the proposed changes are “customer-focused;” however, the data show that parents and students are in favor of the healthier standards. More than 70 percent of parents with school-age children support the updated school meal nutrition standards, according to a nationally representative poll. Continually weakening the standards does not provide more stability and consistency for schools or industry. On the contrary, it continuously changes the goalposts for school efforts and industry reformulation.

The proposed changes in this rule, combined with the 2018 rollbacks, will further undermine the school meal programs. Instead, Prevention Institute urges the Department to:

- **Remove the a la carte entrée exemption entirely.** Do not allow an a la carte side exemption and maintain the whole grain-rich entrée requirement.
- **Maintain the existing variety of vegetable subgroups.** Weakening this requirement would allow an additional three cups of French fries in lunch per week, reducing a healthful variety of vegetables.
- **Maintain the fruit requirement in breakfast outside of the cafeteria** to maintain children’s access to fruit. Halving this requirement will reduce whole fruit for students and could lead to only juice being served.

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6. Total HEI-2010 scores provide an overall measure of nutritional quality. A higher score reflects better conformance with Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommendations and higher nutritional quality.
• **Ensure that removing the grain requirement in breakfast does not increase the amount of processed meat served.** Rather than further diminishing the grain requirement and potentially exposing children to more processed meat, which poses a risk to health, the Department should add a limit for added sugars in school meals, restore the whole grain-rich requirement, and limit processed meat in school meals.

• **Ensure schools are providing age-appropriate meals and portion sizes** by not allowing K-12 or similarly configured schools to use one or two meal patterns for all students. If allowed, this change should be limited to smaller schools with fewer than 500 students.

• **Ensure school tap water safety** and equitable access to appealing water options.

In closing, Prevention Institute is strongly opposed to the proposed rule and troubled by efforts to undermine the quality and nutritional value of foods served in schools. With at least 37 million children impacted by school closures, the COVID-19 pandemic is shining a spotlight on the importance of school meals in promoting student health and wellbeing. We should be raising the bar, not lowering the floor, when it comes to providing children healthy foods. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input.

Sincerely,

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