



**Testimony of Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams
Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)
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My name is Eric Adams and I am the Brooklyn Borough President, representing nearly 2.6 million residents in what would be the fourth largest city in America if it was an independent city. Within this borough are 575 schools serving 342,332 students, many of whom come from low-income and underserved communities.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s recent proposal to roll back nutrition requirements in schools, also referred to as "meal flexibilities," devalues the health of our children. This proposal, which would increase access to one percent chocolate milk in schools, cut whole-grain serving requirements in half, and give nutrition directors more time to meet weakened sodium reduction targets, denies the critical reality that better nutrition is required to ensure better health outcomes. While the proposal states that these "changes respond directly to the needs of nutrition professionals who are the experts on-the-ground, hearing from our children every day," the USDA's own data contradicts both the implied increase in food waste and the notion that children are declining healthier, plant-forward meals. The lack of science behind this rulemaking belies its purpose. The proposal is a last ditch attempt to reinforce the current administration's ties to the dairy, meat, grain, and sugar industries, which prioritize profit over people.

The profits that sugar, grain, and dairy industries stand to make from this proposal come at an enormous cost to the typical taxpayer. Prior to the pandemic, health care costs associated with chronic disease constituted approximately 10 percent of our gross domestic product (GDP). The pandemic has only exacerbated our inability to decrease this burden, fostering harms from food insecurity, obesity, and diet-related chronic disease, and the impact of these conditions while infected with COVID-19. The novel coronavirus' disproportionate devastation of populations living with obesity and/or chronic disease is indisputable: Previous diagnosis with obesity increases the risk of being hospitalized with COVID-19 by more than two-fold and increases the

risk of dying by 48 percent. Two thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, but obesity and/or chronic disease, correlative risks of contracting COVID-19 and the fastest rising rates of food insecurity, disproportionately affect people of color. While this proposal demonstrates a flagrant disregard for the health of all Americans, it blatantly denies communities of color, already suffering from centuries of systemic racism, the right to survive, both current and ongoing pandemics.

Nutritionally insecure children and adults are reliant on the food produced by school cafeterias: in New York City alone, our estimates show that the number of hungry New Yorkers we feed through our grab and go program has doubled since the start of the pandemic. The current proposal would restore milk, whole grain, and sodium flexibilities. Foods high in added sugars, such as one percent chocolate milk, are synonymous with increased risk for developing obesity.¹ Additionally, growing evidence links dairy milk consumption to increased prostate² and breast³ cancer risk. A diet high in whole grains and low in processed grains lowers the risk for colon cancer⁴ and Type 2 diabetes⁵. By allowing high sodium content in foods, we are playing with children's futures (high sodium intake increases risk of hypertension, which in turn elevates risk for atrial fibrillation, stroke, and/or aortic dissection) and development of learned, unfavorable food preferences. Rather than scaling back nutrition guidelines that affect our children's health, why not increase plant-forward menu options, which scientists, doctors, and dieticians have shown improve longevity and quality-of-life in the long term, and help to prevent chronic disease? Working hard to feed everyone means working hard to feed everyone well. Nutritionally negligent products and predatory industry practices should not dictate school menus.

This proposal devalues the health of our people and the planet. If passed it would work against the nutritional changes implemented in Brooklyn public schools — changes already benefiting our communities' health. I want everyone receiving a school lunch in America to experience what is increasingly possible in my community: the provision of nutritious foods in schools. We limit our children's lives when we sentence them to a diet scientifically proven to increase preventable

¹ "Reducing Consumption of Sugar-sweetened Beverages to Reduce the Risk of Childhood Overweight and Obesity", *WHO*, 11 February 2019, https://www.who.int/elena/titles/ssbs_childhood_obesity/en

² Park Y, Mitrou PN, Kipnis V, et al. "Calcium, Dairy foods, and Risk of Incident and Fatal Prostate Cancer: The NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study" *Am J Epid*, 1 December 2007;166:1270-1279 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18000020>

³ Fraser GE, Jaceldo-Siegl K, Orlich M, Maschak A, Sirirat R, Knutsen S. "Dairy, Soy and the Risk of Breast Cancer: Those Confounded Milks" *Intl J Epid*. ePub February 25, 2020. <https://academic.oup.com/ije/advance-article/doi/10.1093/ije/dyaa007/5743492>

⁴ Aune D, Chan DS, Lau R, et al. "Dietary Fibre, Whole Grains, and Risk of Colorectal Cancer: Systematic Review and Dose-Response Meta-Analysis of Prospective Studies", *BMJ*. 2011;343:d6617. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22074852>

⁵ Kyørø C, Tjønneland A, Overvad K, Olsen A, Landberg R. "Higher Whole-Grain Intake is Associated with Lower Risk of Type 2 Diabetes Among Middle-Aged Men and Women: the Danish Diet, Cancer, and Health Cohort", *J Nutr*. 2018;148:1434-1444 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30016529>

causes of death. I urge the USDA to reconsider this proposal, to renounce health-impeding flexibilities, and to champion the most rigorous nutritional standards for human health.