

# John Bennett Creative Services for Child Nutrition Professionals

## **Strategy Brief & Talking Points for December 2018 USDA “Final Rule”**

Attached are some talking points you can use if you are asked by local media or other groups to comment on the recently-announced revision to the 2012 New Regs, cutting back the whole grain requirement, pushing back the sodium targets, and allowing (permanently now) lowfat flavored milk. Notably, the fruit/veggie requirement and others were not changed in any way.

Please note that your responses to our email about the changes have been decidedly mixed – some of you are relieved for the new flexibility and others report not wanting to go back because they and their customers are used to and good with the changes in place now.

**For that reason, we’ve provided TWO VERSIONS of the talking points. We’re also giving them to you in an editable Word file, so you can personalize them as you need to. We’ll be glad to help with that.**

Our best advice on this situation right now is to sit tight with this info and wait to see how (and IF) the news affects you over the next few weeks. Coming as it did just before the holidays, the news may not penetrate much at all. But, if necessary, now or in the future, we can help you sell this change as a positive thing – or (alternatively) help you publicize the fact that your program is maintaining all or most of the current standards, if that’s the case.

Currently, and going forward, it is essential to keep foremost in mind your main PR purpose (which is also, of course, your main operational purpose) – to **relentlessly repeat that we’re doing this to make sure kids eat well and learn well and we welcome any adjustments to the regulations that provide flexibility to serve that mission.**

When the new regulations take effect next summer, we will help you explain/promote this in a new parent letter.

At this point, we are not going to prepare a full-fledged media release on this, but we will be monitoring the situation carefully and listening to your concerns, so don’t hesitate to ask for a release if you feel you need one.

So, look over the attached talking points carefully, and be prepared to talk about the revisions to the 2012 regs, but there’s really no need to bring it up yourself.

Keep in mind that **it is always acceptable, if a media representative, etc. calls, to tell him or her that you are taking care of something right now and to please give you a number to call back in just a few minutes.** Then, gather your thoughts and composure, look over the talking points again, and call back promptly.

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It's also acceptable to **use the talking points** when addressing media as a group or individually, although it's not likely you will have to do so here. If you do, get to know the material and try not to simply read, but use the points to refer to and keep yourself on track.

Finally, **don't feel pressured to say more than you know or can accurately say**. Stay "on message" and stick to the points below, even if you have to repeat key phrases, and resist the all-too-human urge to blather on. Say what you have to say and then stop – it's up to them to frame a new question, so don't let them use "the roaring silence" to get you to keep going kind of aimlessly.

Try to come off as **accommodating and eager to help**, rather than defensive or trying to hide something.

**AND PLEASE** – call or contact us if you need more extensive or specific help or preparation.

***Talking points, if you welcome or intend to adopt the changes:***

1. As always, ***our primary job in (Name of your department) is to make sure that our students are well-fed, so they can learn well in school and live healthy lives.***
2. To help us do that job, several years ago the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, which oversees the School Meals programs across the country, put in place the most sweeping changes to our regulations in the 70-plus year history of the program. Saturated fat and sodium were decreased; whole grains, fruits, and vegetables were increased; calorie maximums per average meal were established; and many, many other changes, large and small, were put in place. ***In our district, we'd already been doing many of these things for years,*** but for the first time the USDA regulations codified what qualifies as good nutrition for our kids.
3. This month (December 2018) USDA announced several adjustments to the regulations: ***the whole grain requirement has been relaxed, sodium targets have been pushed back, and what had been a temporary adjustment to allow 1% lowfat flavored milk has been made permanent.***
4. These minor changes are aimed at providing local child nutrition operations like ours the ***flexibility to prepare and serve our meals so that our kids will receive good nutrition and eat the meals we provide.***
5. I also want to emphasize that ***the requirement to include at least one fruit or vegetable serving is still in place, as are the calorie maximums.***
6. We still are strongly committed to providing nutritious, healthy meals to our students, and we welcome adjustments like these that make it more likely that kids will participate in our programs and eat what we serve them. ***Again, our sole job is to feed students well so they can learn well.***

7. Regarding the three changes specifically: We'll still be ***providing whole-grain rich options in at least half the grains we serve each week.***
8. We'll still be ***expecting our processed-food providers to meet the sodium targets as they take effect,*** even if that will take a little longer and not go quite as low as first planned. ***Our local cooking is already within the sodium targets.***
9. And we believe that ***1% flavored milk is not substantially less healthy than nonfat flavored milk*** – indeed, a small amount of fat is actually good for kids and the key objective is to make sure they drink the milk so they get the protein and calcium.
10. The bottom line is that these relatively minor changes will help us serve a healthy, balanced meal that kids will eat. This is exactly the kind of flexibility that makes sense, and we're very happy that USDA is paying attention to how the school meals regulations work in practice and is adjusting them as necessary. ***These new regulations were put in place to make sure kids eat well and learn well, and we welcome any fine-tuning, like this, that serves that purpose.***

***Talking points, if you do not intend to adopt most or all of the changes:***

1. As always, ***our primary job in (Name of your department) is to make sure that our students are well-fed, so they can learn well in school and live healthy lives.***
2. You may have heard that some nutrition requirements for school meals have been reduced or relaxed, but ***our program has been successful in implementing the original requirements, our customers have adjusted, and we do not intend to make the changes that are now being allowed.***
3. Some background: several years ago, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, which oversees the School Meals programs across the country, put in place the most sweeping changes to our regulations in the 70-plus year history of the program. Saturated fat and sodium were decreased; whole grains, fruits, and vegetables were increased; calorie maximums per average meal were established; and many, many other changes, large and small, were put in place. ***In our district, we'd already been doing many of these things for years,*** but for the first time the USDA regulations codified what qualifies as good nutrition for our kids.
4. This month (December 2018) USDA announced several adjustments to the regulations: ***the whole grain requirement has been relaxed, sodium targets have been pushed back, and what had been a temporary adjustment to allow 1% lowfat flavored milk has been made permanent.***
5. I also want to emphasize that ***the requirement to include at least one fruit or vegetable serving has not changed and is still in place, as are the calorie maximums.***
6. Again, despite these more flexible rules, ***our program does not intend to make the changes that are now being allowed.***

7. So, ***all or nearly all of our grains will still be whole-grain rich***, rather than 50%.
8. We will still endeavor to ***meet the existing sodium targets***. Our local cooking is already within the targets, and we will continue working with ***our processed-food providers to meet the sodium targets***.
9. ***And we will continue to serve flavored milk that is fat-free***. Our kids have already adjusted to the fat-free option so we feel like we're meeting the key objective which is to make sure they drink the milk we serve so they get the protein and calcium.
10. The bottom line is that these changes will not affect our program at this time. ***We feel we can continue to follow the existing regulations and still make sure that our students are well-fed and can learn well in school and live healthy lives.***