

# The School Food Modernization Act: The National Security Case

Enabling schools to prepare healthy food will reduce childhood obesity and increase military eligibility among the next generation

**Today, nearly three-quarters of all young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are unable to join the armed forces. Obesity is the leading medical disqualifier, barring 31% of young adults from military service.<sup>1</sup>**

Excess weight also has implications for the U.S. military beyond recruiting. In less than a decade, obesity increased by 60% among active-duty service members.<sup>2</sup> The Department of Defense currently spends upwards of \$1 billion annually in obesity-related healthcare costs.<sup>3</sup>

## **Healthy school food helps to prevent obesity**

The military must have a sufficient pool of fit young adults to draw from in order to field enough recruits with the qualifications needed to staff a 21st century military. One way to raise fit, healthy children is to ensure they are getting proper nutrition.

America's youth spend more than half of their waking hours in school, and more than 30 million children eat a school lunch each day.<sup>4</sup> The food they consume at school is a crucial part of their diet.

As a result of updated nutrition standards, schools across the nation are now serving food that aligns with current nutrition science. Those meals and snacks include more fruits,

vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy options and fewer empty calories.

## **Outdated kitchens are a barrier to healthy school meals**

As of 2013, nine out of ten school districts nationwide required at least one piece of kitchen equipment to meet the nutrition standards.<sup>5</sup> Originally designed to reheat frozen food, school kitchens needed equipment capable of preparing healthier options, such as steamers and larger refrigerators that can store fresh produce.

To address those challenges, Congress provided more than \$200 million over the past six years for school kitchen equipment upgrades.<sup>6</sup> A recent study found that the funding has resulted in higher meal participation rates, reduced costs, and healthier foods for

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thousands of schools nationwide.<sup>7</sup>

However, many schools are still struggling to prepare healthy and tasty food at a low cost. For example, federal kitchen equipment grants are “generally restricted to a single item valued at or above \$5,000,” but the average need of each school is more than \$68,000.<sup>8</sup>

## **The School Food Modernization Act would enable schools to prepare healthy food**

The School Food Modernization Act is important, bipartisan legislation designed to support recent improvements in school nutrition. This bill would:

- **Authorize targeted grant assistance** for school administrators and food service directors to upgrade kitchen or food storage infrastructure or purchase high-quality, durable kitchen equipment such as commercial ovens, steamers, and stoves.

- **Expand food service training opportunities** with grants to experienced institutions to provide the training and technical assistance school food professionals need to meet nutrition standards, and improve the efficiency of the school meal program.
- **Establish a loan guarantee program within USDA** to help schools acquire new equipment or update, expand, or improve kitchen and dining facilities in order to prepare and serve healthier, more nutritious meals that kids want to eat.

## **Conclusion**

The School Food Modernization Act would keep schools in control of initiating food service improvements and assist them in implementing the changes necessary to serve healthy meals that kids want to eat. Congress should support this legislation as a necessary measure to promote the health of our children and future strength of our military.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense. 2013 Qualified Military Available (QMA). Acquired through personal communication with the Accession Policy and Joint Advertising, Market Research and Studies teams at DoD in July 2014. Also see: Wall Street Journal (2014). Recruits' Ineligibility Tests the Military. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/recruits-ineligibility-tests-the-military-1403909945>

<sup>2</sup> 12.4% in 2011 vs. 7.7% in 2002 according to: Department of Defense (2013, February). 2011 Health Related Behaviors Survey of Active Duty Military Personnel. TRICARE Management Activity. Fairfax, VA and Smith, TJ, et. al (2013, June). Military Personnel Exhibit a Lower Presence of Obesity than the General U.S. Adult Population. Military Nutrition Division, U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. Natick, MA.

<sup>3</sup> Mission: Readiness (2014, September). “Retreat Is Not an Option: Healthier school meals protect children and our country.”

<sup>4</sup> USDA (2016, August). “National School Lunch Program: Participation And Lunches Served.” Retrieved from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pd/slsummar.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> 88%. Pew Charitable Trusts. (2014, March). States Need Updated School Kitchen Equipment. Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project. <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2014/03/26/states-need-updated-school-kitchen-equipment-b>

<sup>6</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts. (2016, June). School Nutrition Gets a Boost From USDA Kitchen Equipment Grants. Retrieved from <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/analysis/2016/06/07/school-nutrition-gets-a-boost-from-usda-kitchen-equipment-grants>

<sup>7</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts. (2016, June). USDA's School Kitchen Grants Benefit Meal Programs and Students. Retrieved from <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/06/usdas-school-kitchen-grants-benefit-meal-programs-and-students>

<sup>8</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts. (2016, March). “Public-Private Partnerships Offer School Kitchen Grants to More Districts.” Retrieved from <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/analysis/2016/03/15/public-private-partnerships-offer-school-kitchen-grants-to-more-districts>

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