

First lady defends law that requires healthier foods in U.S. school lunches

By McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff

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First lady Michelle Obama speaks to school leaders and experts about school nutrition, in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House complex in Washington. A House committee has endorsed a GOP plan to allow some schools to opt out of healthier school meal standards.

WASHINGTON—Michelle Obama has steered clear of most messy political battles. But on Tuesday the first lady publicly took on lawmakers, food companies and lunch ladies. They say the school lunch law she championed nearly four years ago is leading kids to bring lunch from home.

The attempt to ease up on new nutrition standards for school lunches is unacceptable, Obama said. She delivered the remarks at a meeting with school nutrition officials that launched her public campaign to defend the law. The first lady blasted lawmakers for playing “politics with our kids’ health.” She suggested they were trying to “roll back everything we have worked for.”

She said, “It’s unacceptable to me not just as first lady, but also as a mother.”

New Standards For School Food

The confrontational remarks were new for the first lady. She has largely sought to work with the food industry and around Congress in her campaign against childhood obesity. Obama has typically

emphasized partnerships and agreements with food companies. She's been aiming for slow changes in their products and more marketing of healthier options.

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 set new standards for school food. Obama pushed to get it passed. But since then she has rarely waded into legislative or regulatory debates. The law set guidelines for the amount of salt in school lunches and breakfast. It also has targets for more whole grains and fresh fruit.

Now the law is being challenged in Congress. The School Nutrition Association is a coalition of school officials and the food companies that sell mini-pizzas and chicken nuggets to schools. Its members include Pizza Hut, Coca-Cola, Chobani Greek yogurt and Tyson Food Service. The group wants the law gone.

The group supported the law in 2010. But its leaders now say the regulations are too rigid.

Students Throwing Away Food

House Republicans have backed the group's efforts. A House committee is to vote Thursday on a way to allow school districts that have been operating at a loss to seek a one-year exemption from the nutrition guidelines. The measure is expected to win approval in the House.

The exemption is aimed at schools that have seen money become a problem. In some districts, more students are bringing their own lunches from home instead of paying for school lunches. Some districts say they have had trouble finding affordable products that meet the nutrition standards. Meanwhile, they have watched students throw away large amounts of the healthy food.

"This temporary one-year waiver simply throws them a lifeline," said Brian Rell. He is a spokesman for Republican Rep. Robert B. Aderholt of Alabama, the chairman of the agriculture subcommittee.

Supporters of the exemption described it as a modest attempt to add flexibility to the program. They said the first lady's response seemed out of proportion.

But the White House has appeared eager to play tough. White House officials helped with a letter by former presidents of the School Nutrition Association opposing the exemption plan.

The association is also seeking other changes to the law. It wants to scrap a rule that foods be 100 percent whole-grain by July 2014. The association wants to stick with the current 50 percent target. It wants to hold to the current standard for salt rather than a lower target scheduled to go into effect in a few years. The association also supports eliminating the requirement that students take a fruit or vegetable, regardless of whether they plan to eat it.

“Request For Flexibility”

The association “does not want to gut the nutrition standards—we support many of the requirements,” said Leah Schmidt, president. “Our request for flexibility under the new standards does not come from industry or politics. It comes from thousands of school cafeteria professionals.” Those professionals have shown that the rules are hurting efforts to get students to eat healthy, she said.

The White House argues that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers the program, has been flexible. The USDA already delayed a whole-grain provision for pasta. This was in response to complaints that some such pastas were unpopular and could be hard to find. Officials argued against having lawmakers determine what is healthy, noting that lawmakers have bent to food industry complaints in the past, such as an effort in 2011 to count pizza with tomato sauce as a vegetable.

“What we’re not going to do is put politics and interests ahead of what’s good for our kids and allow politicians to set nutrition standards,” said Sam Kass, who runs the first lady’s anti-obesity campaign. Kass is also the White House chef. The USDA estimates that 90 percent of schools are in compliance.

On Tuesday, David Binkle, director of food services for the Los Angeles Unified School District, joined the first lady for the event. Binkle noted that he was a member of the School Nutrition Association. But he said its “hard line” on the law did not reflect his views.

“In fact, we don’t serve the typical corn dog and chicken nuggets,” he said. “We don’t even have pizza on the menu.”