

# THE MORAL LIBERAL

## We're from the Government and We're Here to Help: School Lunch Edition

By Jason Bedrick  
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How much does a “free” school lunch cost?

In the last few years, First Lady Michelle Obama has worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to make school lunches healthier. In 2011, Neal McCluskey [argued](#) that, though well-intentioned, the changes would result in more wasted food, higher costs, and major implementation challenges. The General Accounting Office has now issued a [report](#) that [confirms these concerns](#):

According to the GAO report, local and state authorities told researchers the new standards have resulted in more waste, higher food costs, challenges with menu planning and difficulties in sourcing products that meet the federal portion and calorie requirements.

When such decisions are made at the local level, schools can solicit and respond to feedback from parents and students. However, when the proverbial faceless bureaucrat in some distant Washington office decides, the rules tend to be uniform and inflexible, leading to all sorts of [unintended consequences](#):

The federal government's changes to school lunch menus have been disastrous, causing problems for cafeterias trying to comply with the rules and leaving the menu so expensive or unpalatable that more than 1 million students have stopped buying lunch, according to a government audit...

One school district told federal investigators that it had to add unhealthy pudding and potato chips to its menu to meet the government's minimum calorie requirements. Other school districts removed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from their elementary school menus.

Five of the eight school districts surveyed by the Government Accountability Office, the official watchdog for Congress, said they believed students were going hungry because of smaller entree portions demanded by the rules.

In other words, the so-called “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act” actually resulted in some kids being served less healthy food while other kids went hungry.

Two-thirds of states reported on the GAO survey that implementation in 2012-13 was a “very great challenge” or an “extreme challenge.” The report noted that much of the difficulty was

related to the sheer volume of regulations. In just 18 months, the USDA issued 1,800 pages of “guidance” for following the new rules. Moreover, the “guidance” was “provided too late in the 2012-2013 school year to be helpful” because schools “had already planned menus and trained food service staff” on what they thought the new rules required. However, some guidance memos “either substantively changed or contradicted aspects of previously issued memos.” When state officials contacted the USDA’s regional offices for guidance on understanding the “guidance,” the USDA staff were “sometimes unable to answer state questions on the guidance.”

Let’s hope this serves as a cautionary tale for those who want the federal government to play a larger role in education policy in general.

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