

Public school lunch worse than fast food

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture is buying beef and chicken to serve to your children in public school that fast-food chains reject as poor quality or even unsafe.

An [investigation by USA TODAY](#) found that quality and safety standards used by fast food chains were much more stringent than those the government uses.

For instance, the USDA supplied schools with old, rejected chickens which would have otherwise been used as pet food or compost. KFC refuses to buy these so-called "spent hens," which are too old to lay eggs, and Campbell's Soup cites quality as its reason for rejecting them. But your kids are

eating them in school.

"Mature hens must comply with the same safety standards as any other chicken processed and sold to consumers," Rayne Pegg, head of the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, [told USA TODAY](#). But a 2002 Washington State University study found that spent hens were four times more likely to be contaminated with salmonella.

It found that McDonald's, Burger King, and retail outlets like Costco tested their meat five to 10 times more often than the government, and that [fast food standards for potentially harmful bacteria](#) were up to 10 times more stringent than government standards for school lunches.

"We simply are not giving our kids in schools the same level of quality and safety as you get when you go to many fast-food restaurants," says J. Glenn Morris, professor of medicine and director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute at the University of Florida. "We are not using those same standards."

It wasn't supposed to be this way. In 2000, then-Agriculture secretary Dan Glickman directed the USDA to adopt "the highest standards" for school meat. He cited concerns that fast-food chains had tougher safety and quality requirements than those set by the USDA for schools, and he vowed that "the disparity would exist no more."

Today, USDA rules for meat sent to schools remain more stringent than the department's minimum safety requirements for meat sold at supermarkets. But those government rules have fallen behind the increasingly tough standards that have evolved among fast-food chains and more selective retailers. — [USA TODAY](#)

"Companies that have to attract and keep customers to stay in business have a huge incentive to avoid such things as, you know, sending their customers to the hospital," [wrote](#) Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom. "Not so government bureaucrats or

educationists, who are getting your tax dollars no matter what.”

A [USA TODAY analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data](#) found that between 1998 and 2007, over 470 outbreaks of food-borne illness sickened at least 23,000 school children.



Now some government bureaucrats [want to copy](#) the fast food chains’ testing requirements. “Our children deserve a testing program at least as good as the fast food chains,” Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) wrote in a letter to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. Gillibrand also asked for the USDA “to terminate contracts with any habitual violators of your food safety policies.” Vilsack said that the department would conduct a review, but didn’t promise anything.

One of those “habitual violators” was Beef Packers of Fresno, Calif., which supplied 450,000 pounds of ground beef to the government for public schools last summer. [Beef Packers had to recall another 826,000 pounds](#) at the time for salmonella contamination. After a second recall last week where two people in Arizona fell ill, some members of Congress [want Beef Packers closed](#).

Maybe we need corporations to save us from evil government, rather than the reverse. It’s clear that the government is incapable on its own of assuring food safety. Or, as McCluskey says, “How many more children have to get E. coli before we allow freedom in education?”