School lunches may get a little less healthy with passage of new bill

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Chocolate milk is coming back to school lunches. So are white bread and saltier food.

The changes appear in a few paragraphs tucked into a huge 1,665-page government spending bill. They would relax nutrition standards for school lunches. The standards were part of former President Barack Obama’s rules.

The bill was passed by the Senate and House of Representatives. Now, it will go to President Trump, who is expected to sign it. In the bill, the secretary of agriculture is directed to allow states to give schools breaks from the rules. Then they can serve flavored low-fat milk and bread products that are not rich in whole grains.

The bill keeps the federal government funded through September 30. The changes to school lunch rules would extend deadlines for schools to comply with a lower sodium level rule. It would bar federal money from paying the salaries of any government officials who put the nutrition standards in place.
New Secretary Of Agriculture Wants To Make Changes

The changes would apply only to the 2017-2018 school year. However, they seem to mirror changes to school lunch standards the government announced Monday. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue was appointed by President Trump. On Monday, Secretary Perdue signaled his intent to kick off a more extensive reevaluation of the rules. They were put in place under former President Obama.

Perdue said the change was based on "years of feedback." He said that students, schools and food service experts reported the challenges they are facing from the rules.

Perdue visited Catoctin Elementary School in Leesburg, Virginia. While there, he signed a statement that his department would move to ease standards for whole grains, sodium and milk. He said food rules had cost districts and states an extra $1.22 billion in the 2015 plan.

Michelle Obama Promoted Healthier School Lunches

Making school lunches healthier was a signature achievement of former President Barack Obama. Michelle Obama, the former first lady, also promoted healthy school lunches. This was part of her "Let's Move" program to end obesity. Obesity is being overweight to the point where it can lead to health problems, like heart disease and diabetes.

The Obama rules tried to prevent schools from serving salty, sugary and higher-fat products. They required schools to serve more fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthier items. Fat-free milk could be flavored, but not low-fat milk.

Some school districts and cafeteria workers complained that the rules are too strict. Without more choices, they warned, they would have to keep throwing away food that kids refuse to eat. The whole grains, fruits and vegetables would go to waste.

Some Kids Won't Eat The Fruits And Veggies

"All the way through this, the yardstick on the school lunch program was whether or not the kids were eating," said Kansas Senator Pat Roberts. He joined Perdue and a group of fifth-graders on Monday for lunch at Catoctin Elementary School.

Loosening the Obama rules so that school districts can serve food that children will eat has been a priority for Roberts. He oversees the lunch program as a leader of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Over the past few years, he has toured schools in Kansas to try school lunches and talk to students and administrators.

"We had kids sneaking into the school cafeterias with salt shakers and ketchup," Roberts said. The senator said his staff worked with Perdue and other members of Congress. They made sure that the section about loosening school lunch rules made it into the 2017 spending bill.
This is just the beginning, Roberts said. He thinks more can be done to make school lunches appealing to kids.

If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It

Cecilia Munoz worked for President Obama. She said the standards were starting to have a positive effect. The number of children who are overweight was not increasing as quickly. Munoz said that Obama’s team built quite a bit of freedom into the rules to ensure school districts would be able to follow them. Nearly all of them, 99 percent, had done so, she said.

"By and large, these are regulations that are being implemented successfully," she said. The section in the new spending bill, she said, is an attempt to drop rules that are hard to undo once they’re in place.

"This looks like something that's being done for the sake of industry at the expense of kids," Munoz said.

She said that changing the rule is "fighting the science."

She thinks a change to the rules will face lawsuits. It is hard to prove that there is a reason for changing rules that seem to be working, she added. "It’s going to be interesting what the rationale is going to be for adding more salt to foods or moving away from whole grains to more refined grains."