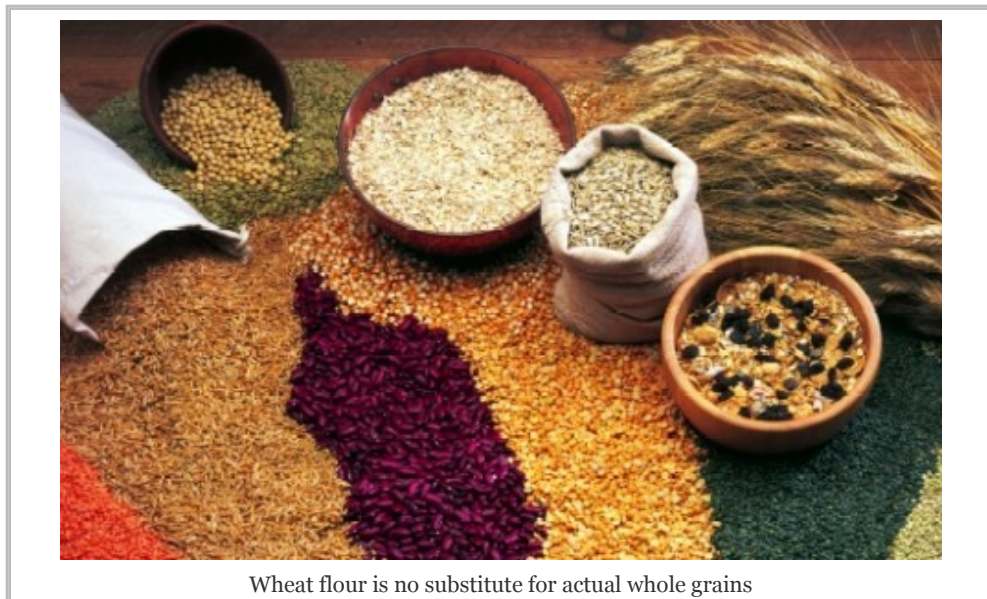




What's Really Behind Whole Grains in School Food

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Guest Post

By Lisa Suriano

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed [new school meal guidelines](http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2011/pdf/2011-485.pdf) (<http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2011/pdf/2011-485.pdf>) [PDF] that call for substantially more whole grains. But if you thought that meant kids would start seeing bulgur and spelt on their cafeteria trays, think again. What it really means are the same old dinner rolls, pizza crusts and bread sticks—only with extra whole wheat flour mixed in.

The federal government allows products that are at least 51 percent “whole grain” to be labeled as such. The only actual grain the USDA sells to schools through its commodity program is brown rice.

The proposed rule change would require that all grain products on school menus qualify as “whole

grain-rich” within two years. Schools would have to offer students up to two grain servings for breakfast every day. Currently, schools have a choice of offering a grain or a meat or meat substitute, such as yogurt or cheese.

On the surface, the new rule sounds like positive change. The USDA says it wants to make school food healthier by cutting back on processed foods and introducing more fiber into kids’ diets. In reality, the “whole grain” foods served in school are not always what they seem.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, in response to a petition filed by the food industry in 1999, ruled that foods containing 51 percent whole grains could be labeled “whole grain.” As one of the crops heavily subsidized by the federal government, wheat is much cheaper than healthy grains such as quinoa and amaranth that aren’t subsidized. That makes it a perfect candidate for cash-strapped school kitchens.

The question is, how much healthier are those dinner rolls if 49 percent of the flour in them is still refined? Flour and other starchy carbohydrates have been closely linked to the current epidemic of childhood obesity and related health problems, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension and coronary artery disease.

In fact, one of the things the USDA proposes to do to make school meals healthier is cut back sharply on other starchy foods such as potatoes. Potatoes are another crop the federal government does not subsidize.

The USDA has made previous efforts to promote healthier school food. In 2004, the agency launched The HealthierUS School Challenge (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthierus/index.html>). Participation in this program is voluntary. Monetary incentives are awarded to schools that meet specific criteria for menu planning, nutrition education and physical activity that go beyond what is required of schools that participate in the traditional National School Lunch Program.

The criteria for grains and breads are these:

- Whole grain food products must be at least the portion size of one Grains/Breads serving as defined by the USDA *Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs* manual.
- Whole grain food products that meet HUSSC criteria are categorized into two groups:
 - o Group A – Food products with whole grain(s) as the primary ingredient by weight (whole grain is first ingredient on list)

o Group B – Food products with whole grain(s) as the primary *grain* ingredient by weight . For example: water is the first ingredient, whole grain is the second

- Whole grain food products from Group A must be the majority of whole grain foods offered each week.

While these are effective guidelines in theory, the FDA’s definition of “whole grain” ensures that children only get one-quarter of their grain servings from actual whole grain sources.

There are many other densely nutritious grains available for human consumption—bulgar, wheat berries, barley, quinoa, millet, to name a few. However, the current system discourages their use and instead provides a loophole for cheap, refined flour.

Of the 48 grain products on the USDA’s list of commodity foods available to schools, 17 fall under the “white flour” category and 12 under white rice. The USDA only lists three brown rice products.

The USDA in issuing its new meal guidelines says it will work with schools and manufacturers to develop new whole grain products and recipes.

I’ve been closely following Fed Up With Lunch (<http://fedupwithschoolunch.blogspot.com/search/label/rice>) where a teacher calling herself “Mrs. Q” ate 162 school lunches over the course of a year and blogged about it. In all those meals, rice—mostly white, not brown—was served only seven times.

And even when rice was served, it was accompanied by still more starch in the form of a “whole wheat” bun or breadstick in order to satisfy the USDA’s grain requirement for school meals.


As a nutritionist with extensive experience in school food service, I believe it’s entirely possible to work within established guidelines, fulfill HealthierUS School Challenge requirements and simultaneously educate young palates about nutrient-packed whole grains.

Why do we grind so much of the nation’s wheat crop into flour? There are many other nutritious ways to enjoy wheat.

Bulgur wheat, for example, is full of fiber, potassium and iron. It’s parboiled during processing, making it a very quick cooking grain. For the around 24 cents, a half-cup of bulgur wheat could be served for lunch.

Match it with some government black-eyed peas and a piece of barbecued chicken and you have a reimbursable meal that children *will* eat.

Lisa Suriano is the owner and founder of [Veggiecation](http://www.veggiecation.com/), a curriculum-based lunch program that introduces young children to the nutritious world of vegetables.

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