



Back to School: Innovative Solutions Prove Dairy Is Essential to Students

By Julie Sweney, Director of Communications at FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative

Summer is officially in the rearview mirror, and teachers and kids are back in school. For some, the feeling of being back in the classroom is nearly electric – especially after the turbulent year that was 2020 thanks to COVID-19.

As students take their seats and teachers begin to teach, it's important to ensure we're providing the very best environment for these students to thrive. And that includes the food options available to them in the cafeteria. To be ready to learn, they must meet their body's nutritional needs, and there's one food ready to deliver: milk.

Certainly, milk has always had a presence in school cafeterias, but over a decade ago, legislation came forth with the intention to improve the health of school age children by allowing only low-fat and fat-free options, reducing calories and increasing the number of fruits and vegetables. While the intentions were sincere, the outcome was not ideal, as less milk was being consumed and too many full cartons were being tossed.

Since then, we've learned that reducing dairy options to low-fat and fat-free milk was not in the best interests of student nutrition – in fact, research shows that the higher the milkfat, the greater the benefit. Dairy has been continuing to advocate for progress in expanding milk options in schools, and provisions have been secured in Appropriations measures meaning that the provisions are limited to that year's annual round of federal funding.

Thanks to Congressman Joe Courtney (D-CT) and Glenn Thompson (R-PA), who have authored the School Milk Nutrition Act (H.R. 4635), which would allow schools the option of offering low-fat flavored milk. This legislation, if passed, will codify into law the regulatory allowance that USDA has given school systems in recent years. This Courtney-Thompson bill helps position the dairy sector to secure a long-term fix within child nutrition legislation that hopefully both the House and Senate will consider in the coming months.

It's about time.

FarmFirst Dairy Cooperative has been a long-time advocate for expanding milk options in schools. Advocating for this type of legislation has not been an easy task, as other pieces of legislation have taken the attention away from this one, but its relevance and importance has never been diminished.

Taking this notion one step further is another recently introduced piece of legislation, the Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act (H.R. 1861), which would modify current law to allow schools to serve milk at all fat levels, both flavored and unflavored. This measure is authored by Reps. GT Thompson (R-PA) and Antonio Delgado (D-NY). If we truly cared about providing optimal nutrition to students in a variety of

options, whole milk would become the standard milk option for schools to offer their students, and in a variety of flavors. Better yet, dairy options should be expanded beyond just fluid milk.

As we work to make higher-milkfat and flavored milk options more appealing to today's youngest generation, the dairy industry needs to meet their expanding taste preferences while still providing a nutritional punch. Take the Sioux Falls, S.D. school district for example. Thanks to the Midwest Dairy Association, the Sioux Falls school district is providing a variety of dairy-focused breakfast and snack foods free of charge to its students of all ages. Fruit smoothies that are combined with whole grain are currently a popular item available on the schools' "breakfast cart." Last year, a smoothie program was launched in 13 Wichita, Kansas schools, which means the district served 300,000 more pounds of milk than usual between January and June 2021.

The idea behind the grab-and-go breakfasts is that students who are hustling to get to school on time don't have to compromise on getting a strong start to their day in terms of nutrition. It seems like a solid investment for the school to have a student ready to learn, in addition to the dairy industry, as students come to love the tasteful, nutritional powerhouse in something as simple as a breakfast smoothie.

The innovation doesn't stop there – smoothies are just one popular menu item that allows dairy to be more accessible to students and in a form they love to consume. Coffee is another popular option that goes hand in hand with milk and is making its way onto these breakfast carts in area high schools.

While these two pieces of legislation slowly make their way before Congress to be considered for a vote, school districts like Sioux Falls and Wichita are already proving the success of dairy's presence in schools. Let's not let this opportunity pass us by to ensure our students have a variety of dairy options available to them at school, including flavored and higher milkfat options, to support a healthy body and a healthy mind.