

RIDGE PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

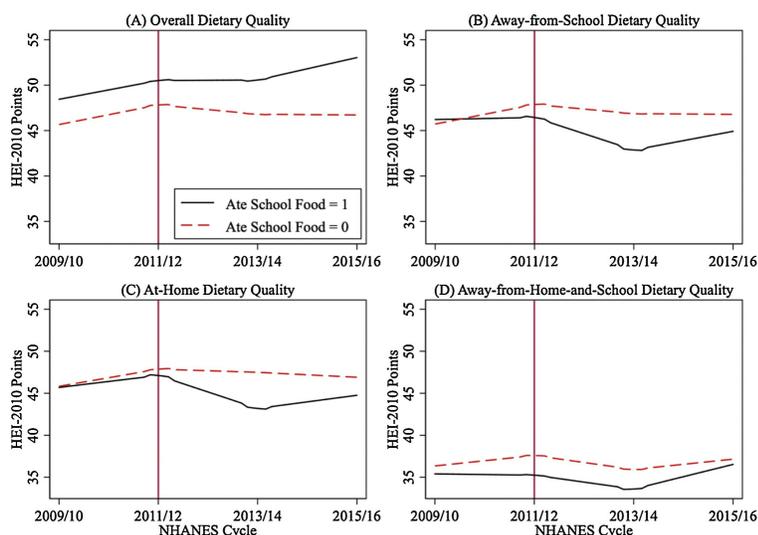
Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act improves school-aged children dietary quality



The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 led to significant improvements in school food and ultimately better overall quality of children's diets, based on recent findings from [Dr. Pourya Valizadeh](#) at the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The increase in the diet quality of school foods more than compensated for the shift towards lower-quality diets at home.

In 2010, HHFKA made major changes to improve school nutritional standards. The new rules implemented in 2012–13 for lunches and in 2013–14 for breakfasts, increased offerings of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, while reducing sodium and saturated fats. Pourya Valizadeh, a 2019 grantee of the Tufts/UConn RIDGE Program, used dietary intake data from the 2009–2016 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) to examine the impacts of HHFKA's new nutrition standards on the overall calorie intake and children's dietary quality and their variation across food acquisition sources (school vs. away-from-school). Changes in food intakes at school may indicate direct effects of the HHFKA reforms while changes at home and restaurants may indicate indirect effects.

Dietary quality of children by school food consumption, overall and across food sources



Note: HEI = Healthy Eating Index

As intended, HHFKA's new standards were shown to significantly increase the diet quality of at-school food, particularly among older (6-12 graders) and higher-income children. At the same time, the quality of food consumed outside of school settings, specifically at home, declined, leading to a negative compensation and a lower improvement in overall child nutrition. These compensatory changes, although disappointing, were not strong enough to eliminate gains in overall dietary quality brought by post-HHFKA school foods. The study also showed that the HHFKA implementation of more nutritious, less energy-dense foods led to a modest decline in daily calorie intake among school children.

RIDGE grantee Pourya Valizadeh concluded: "The research supported by RIDGE helped advance efforts to unravel the impacts of the HHFKA on school children's nutrition. Overall, we find that the HHFKA, despite some unintended negative spillover effects, largely succeeded in achieving its intended goal of providing nutrient-dense meals for school children."

Valizadeh, P. and Ng, S. W. (2020), The New School Food Standards and Nutrition of School Children: Direct and Indirect Effect Analysis. *Economics & Human Biology*. doi: [10.1016/j.ehb.2020.100918](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2020.100918)



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