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**More Children Eat Fruit in School, Study Shows**

Lunchtime at a middle school in Rotterdam, N.Y., in 2012. The study also found that children are throwing away less food.

HANS PENNINK, ASSOCIATED PRESS

By RON NIXON

MARCH 4, 2015

WASHINGTON — Changes made to government-subsidized meals by the Obama administration to get schoolchildren to eat more fruits are having their intended effect, according to a study released on Wednesday.

The study, by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut, found that from the time the changes went into effect in 2012 through last year, the percentage of students choosing fruit on a cafeteria line increased to 66 percent from 54 percent.

Perhaps more important, the study found that children were throwing away less food now than they were before the new guidelines were put in place. Students ate 84 percent of their entrees, not including fruit, up from 71 percent before the rules were in place, thus decreasing the amount of food waste, the researchers found.

Many critics of the new nutritional guidelines had claimed that children were throwing food in the trash because they were being forced to eat more nutritious but less desirable meals.

The study appeared Wednesday in the journal Childhood Obesity.

“This research adds to evidence that the updated nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program can succeed in helping students eat healthier,” said Marlene B. Schwartz, the study’s lead author and the director of the Rudd Center.

The study is one of the first to take a comprehensive look at eating patterns in the school lunch program since the new regulations went into place. The updated nutrition standards — which were passed by Congress in 2010 as part of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and put into final form by the Agriculture Department in 2012 — are based on recommendations from a panel of experts at the Institute of Medicine. They took effect in the 2012-13 school year.

To study the eating habits of children in the school lunch program, researchers at the Rudd Center analyzed students’ food selection, consumption and waste before and after the updated standards were in place by photographing and weighing individual items on lunch trays, according to the study.

The researchers tracked students from 12 middle schools in an urban school district for three years — from the spring of 2012, before the standards changed, through the spring of 2014.

The School Nutrition Association, an advocacy group of school nutrition workers affectionately known as the “lunch ladies,” which has been lobbying Congress to scale back the new school meals rules, criticized the study. The group said the study used a limited number of schools to produce its findings and glossed over other details. The association, which is backed partly by major food companies, has argued that the new school meal standards increase costs and food waste.

“We have lots of concerns about this study because, among other things, it only collected data on one day each year at these schools,” said Diane Pratt-Heavner, a spokeswoman for the association. “And of course you’re going to see an increase in students getting fruit. Under the new rules, they have to take a fruit when they come through the lunch line.”

The school lunch regulations have long been a source of criticism from some Republican lawmakers and school officials who say the healthier meals — a major part of Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign to fight childhood obesity — are not appetizing to children and driving up costs for schools.

As a result, the critics said, fewer students are participating in lunch programs. The study did find that participation has declined, but that the decline started even before the new school lunch rules were put into place.

Despite the study, the political battle over school lunches seems likely to continue.

On Monday, Senator John Hoeven, Republican of North Dakota, announced plans to introduce legislation that would relax the new rules for school lunches, giving schools time to adjust to the changes and added cost. The bill has the backing of the School Nutrition Association, which is making its case against the rules with lawmakers this week on Capitol Hill.

The Agriculture Department said the new rules would cost school districts $1.2 billion in additional food and labor expenses this year.

Tom Vilsack, the agriculture secretary, said the Agriculture Department is providing money to schools that are struggling to meet the new standards.

“There are some school districts having problems, but we are helping them,” Mr. Vilsack said in an interview on Tuesday. “Uniformly rolling back the standards is not the answer. You have to look at this on a case-by-case basis.”