House GOP: Schools Can Opt Out of Unprofitable Healthy Food Programs

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WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans are proposing to let some schools opt out of healthier school lunch and breakfast programs if they are losing money.

A GOP spending bill for agriculture and food programs released Monday would allow schools to apply for waivers if they have a net loss on school food programs for six months in a row.

Championed by first lady Michelle Obama, the new standards have been phased in over the last two school years, with more changes coming in 2014. The rules set fat, calorie, sugar and sodium limits on foods in the lunch line and beyond.

The first lady was holding a call to rally supporters of the healthier food rules Monday as a House subcommittee is expected to consider the bill on Tuesday.

While many schools have had success putting the rules in place, others have said the rules are too restrictive and costly. The House Appropriations Committee said in a release that the waiver language is in response to requests from schools.

The School Nutrition Association, which represents school nutrition directors and companies who sell food to schools, said Monday that schools need more room to make their own decisions.

"School meal programs need more flexibility to plan menus that increase student consumption of healthy choices while limiting waste," said Leah Schmidt, president of the organization.

The School Nutrition Association says that almost half of school meal programs reported declines in revenue in the 2012-13 school year and 90 percent said food costs were up.

Nutrition advocates and other supporters of the rules say it will take some time for schools to adjust and the House proposal is overly broad. Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest says the House Republicans are using a "hacksaw rather than a scalpel" to try and solve problems some schools are having.

Wootan argues that there may be other factors in play such as enrollment or food costs if a lunch program is losing money.

"It's a shame that the House Republicans are taking a step backward and allowing schools to serve more unhealthy food to children," she said.

The House bill would provide money for Agriculture Department programs and Food and Drug Administration programs. A Senate subcommittee was also scheduled to mark up its version of the food and farm spending bill Tuesday but that panel has not yet released its language.

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