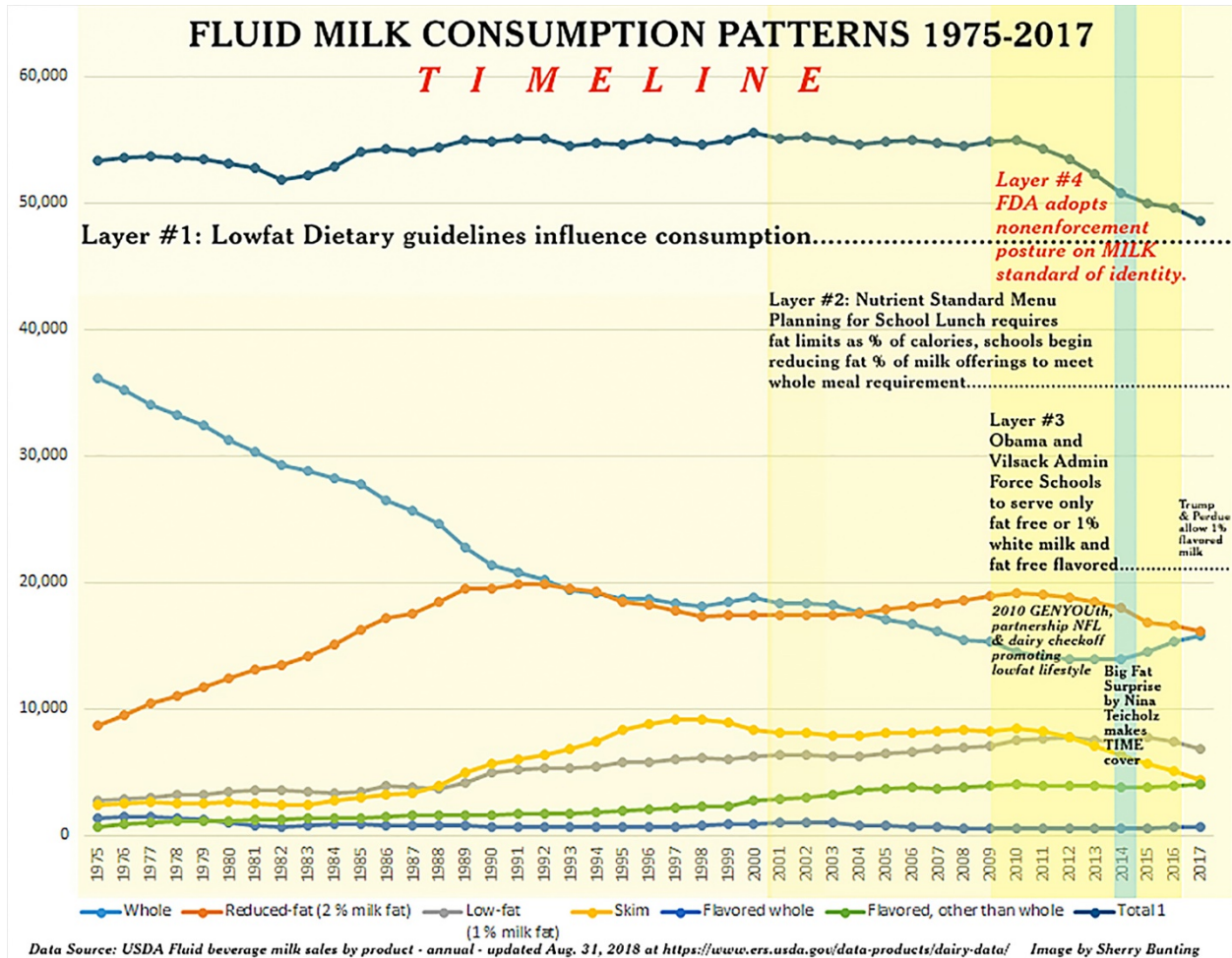


SENATE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING

WHOLE MILK IN SCHOOLS, JUNE 16, 2021

Good morning Honorable Chairman Scavello and Senate Committee. Thank you for this hearing and inviting me to testify on whole milk in schools. My name is Sherry Bunting. I have seen first hand the impact that the school milk choice issue has on farms through my 40 years as an ag journalist, and on our children in my 8 years as a former elected school director on the Eastern Lancaster County School Board, not to mention many years as a school-involved mother and grandmother.

I have visited with thousands of dairy producers, and as a dairy market columnist, I see the numbers.



While fluid milk sales have been on the decline for decades, it is the years from 2010 through 2018 that are most concerning as you can see in the chart.

In 2010, Congress passed the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act. Two years prior to that, the national dairy checkoff program, which farmers must pay into, formed a memorandum of understanding with USDA to advance the department's Dietary Guidelines agenda and has since that time promoted fat free and low fat milk, not whole milk.

In 2011, USDA targeted whole milk and 2% milk for removal from schools, observing in a report to which the dairy checkoff's school wellness program with USDA and the NFL – called Fuel Up to Play 60 -- contributed some of the data. It showed that the schools voluntarily removing these two milk choices were meeting department goals for showing "competing foods" met their Dietary Guidelines restrictions on fat. The department then issued low fat and fat free rules for milk served not just with meals but also a la carte.

Meanwhile, rates of obesity and diabetes are climbing fastest in those over 2 years old in the poorest demographics over the past 10 years, a fact acknowledged by experts testifying before the U.S. Senate Ag Committee during the June 2019 Childhood Nutrition hearing.

Since oversight and implementation are through both the federal and state agencies, this is both a federal and state issue. As Pennsylvania considers the state's interest here, the New York Senate is as well, since it was brought to their attention in an April 2021 hearing.

First, as school doors are closed to whole milk -- the most likely dairy product to have been produced on Pennsylvania farms -- the doors are open to processed energy and sports drinks bolstering the profits of large global beverage, snack and foodservice companies.

The options kids turn to when they throw away the skim milk do not come close to offering the 21 vitamins, 13 minerals and 8 grams of protein in an 8-ounce cup of whole milk. This means, for many kids, the nutrition on paper is not realized by their growing bodies, brains and immune systems.

School milk sales are 6 to 8% of total U.S. fluid milk sales, according to the National Milk Producers Federation. However, this represents a whole generation over 10 years. The Northeast Council of Farmer Cooperatives stated in 2017 that dairy farmers sold 288 million fewer half pints of milk from 2013 to 2016, and this did not even include what is served "with the meal" and then discarded as students choose other beverages a la carte.

This is important to dairy farmers because they have, in effect, lost a generation of milk drinkers. Fluid milk sales are the class earning farmers the highest return in the milk check blend price.

While reduced farmer pay price is a factor in the rapid consolidation of the industry and pursuit of export markets over the past decade, it is also a factor in Pennsylvania losing farms and production at an alarming rate, and thus losing ag infrastructure, revenue and jobs.

From 2010 to 2020, Pennsylvania lost 1,974 dairy farms (7400 dairies was the average for 2009; 5430 for 2020). Over those 10 years, our state lost more than 75,000 cows and 1.8 billion pounds of annual production (going from 550,000 cows at the beginning of 2010 to 475,000 at the beginning of 2021 and milk production dropping from 10.5 bil. pounds 2010 to 8.7 bil. pounds 2020.)

Fresh fluid milk sales are the key to Pennsylvania's dairy farms being viable to compete now and into the future. On a national level, the dairy processing industry is moving toward even more value-stripping of milk's elements for use in blended beverages that can be made anywhere as shelf-stable products in warehouses for transport and distribution to anywhere.

The fat-free / low-fat push enables valuable milk fat to be treated as a byproduct, meaning less value is returned to farms in their milk checks, and the fat becomes a cheaper ingredient in making other products. There is no shortage of milk fat to lead us to believe our school children can't have the better tasting whole milk. In fact, producers would be paid a fairer price for their milk if the true value – including health value -- of milk fat were recognized by government agencies.

A whole separate hearing could be held simply on the major flaws in the USDA Dietary Guidelines process, not the least of which is the USDA ignored recommendations by the Academy of Medicine, Engineering and Science, in setting parameters for what studies on saturated fat would be included or excluded in the 2015 and 2020 review of those guidelines.

Pennsylvania consumers are smart. They are reading the scientific literature. They are choosing whole milk for their families. At the national level, whole milk sales rose 1% in 2019, making whole milk the largest volume sector of milk sales for the first time in over 30 years. This was followed by a 2.6% rise in whole milk sales in 2020. At a more localized level, Redner's Warehouse Markets reports a 14.5% rise in whole milk sales in their stores over the past two years.

Evidence, particularly since 2014, of the benefits of milk fat are being recognized by health and nutrition professionals and consumers.

Our schools, our children should be at the front of that curve, not behind it.

Today, children receive one or mostly two meals a day at school, and Congress is considering a bill right that would make it universal for all children to receive three free meals plus a snack every day through schools.

Consumers want fresh local unprocessed whole foods. Most do not even know their kids are not getting whole milk as a choice at school.

Two years ago, I initiated a [change.org](https://www.change.org/p/bring-whole-milk-back-to-schools) petition to bring whole milk choice back to schools. It reached almost 25,000 signatures and hundreds of comments. In addition, over 5000 paper petitions were mailed to me.

The online and paper petitions totaled over 30,000 signatures, many accompanied by letters and comments. The petition is national, but the percentage of signatures from Pennsylvania represents over half of the signatures.

In going through the spreadsheet of signatures to assess the demographics and put towns with states, I learned the signatories come from all walks of life, including dairy farmers, parents, grandparents, students, coaches, dieticians, doctors, nurses, professors, teachers, athletes, social service employees, school board directors, local government officials, state legislators, members of Congress.

This online petition is available at <https://www.change.org/p/bring-whole-milk-back-to-schools> and a downloaded list of signatures and separate document for comments and other materials can be found in the folder at this dropbox link: [Whole Milk Choice In Schools Petition 2020 - Dropbox](#)

Now is the time to act because the children and dairy farmers of Pennsylvania are counting on us. Thank you for listening and please help us bring the simple choice of whole milk back to our schools.

