

# 25-01-17 TheBuzz web

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School meals, healthier food, ultra-processed foods, chemical additives, food dyes, nutrition science, federal funding, school lunch programs, processed foods, food safety, legislative bill, RFK Jr., food industry, health impact, school nutrition.

## SPEAKERS

Michael Dauphinais, Melanie Hingle, Lindsay Aguilar, Nicole Cox, NPR promo, Leo Biasiucci, Christopher Conover

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Michael Dauphinais 00:00

Following is an azpm original production.



Christopher Conover 00:09

Welcome to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover this week, making school meals healthier. A new bill in the Arizona legislature could result in the meals served in our public schools getting healthier. The bill would ban foods that contain 11 ingredients from the meals schools serve, saying those ingredients are most frequently put into ultra-processed foods and can have a detrimental effect on the eaters health. To hear more about the bill and the ingredients it singles out. We spoke with its sponsor, Republican state representative Leo Biasiucci. I started our conversation by asking him why he introduced the bill. Now, when health experts have warned of these chemicals for years,



Leo Biasiucci 01:01

it's, you know, something I've always been looking into, I've also involved in nutrition and just kind of been reading labels probably the last 10 years. But it's really, I think, since the RFK Jr kind of came into the spotlight as a Republican under this administration, is when it, finally, for me, it was saying, like, finally, we have somebody that's willing to speak on the national level and make it a really, you know, a hot topic, and bring it to the forefront. For me, it was exciting because this is something I've been, you know, you kind of talk about, and people, you know, don't really pay attention, or, I don't know if they don't care, but what started this all is my family's from Italy, and so we go and visit quite a bit. And so I was actually, when I was there, I was looking at a lot of their food items that they have, and they provide, and it didn't have, you know, nearly 90% of the things that we have in ours. So I'm looking at the label of, you know, even a Poweraid the same, same company that's making this product, and I'm noticing that

they don't have, you know, the blue 40 or four red 40, or whatever it is. And then I started to research and realize a lot of these items are banned in a lot of other countries and not in ours. And that's really where it kind of like piqued my interest on, 'Okay, wait a minute, what's happening here? Where, you know all these items are banned in these other countries, but we're still allowing it in the US?' I say it all the time, where I can't blame my parents for what they fed me, because they just didn't know 20 years ago, 30 years ago now, the data is finally coming out. The scientific research is coming out that we're realizing, okay, maybe this is not good for our children.

**C** Christopher Conover 02:29

The bill deals specifically with public schools. Does that include charter schools and for people who may question, why not include private schools and parochial schools and others?

**L** Leo Biasiucci 02:42

yeah. So my goal is any school that's going to take any dollars from the federal government or any kind of dollars to supplement their food program, and so I think this is, like, a good step for me, like, and if you look at the list, even, you know, I had some people come to me and say, well, there's a lot more things that are, you know, toxic in our foods. But I also understand the legislature, and I understand the process down here, and how sometimes you can't get, you know, too crazy with your bills. You have to make sure you you get your foot in the door. And I and so this is kind of a good first step, and then hopefully this will expand to, you know, doing things like, like California took it to a whole nother level, which I hope we can get to at some point.

**C** Christopher Conover 03:19

Now, you just said something that may have made some people listening to this possibly drive off the road. You said California did something good.

**L** Leo Biasiucci 03:28

I know

**C** Christopher Conover 03:29

that's not something we hear Republicans say a lot.

**L** Leo Biasiucci 03:32

You're right. And I said there's a lot of things, especially now, that are not being done well, but I gotta give credit where credits do. So they they actually just recently banned, not only in our their school lunches, but even in regular foods they're banning, going through the list, I know

almost all of them that are on my list. So yellow die, five, yellow, six. School lunches. Blue, one, blue, two. I gotta give them credit. I mean, they, they've taken the step in the right direction, and it's exciting to see them that they've, you know, really took it upon themselves to be one of the first days to do it, if not the first. I haven't researched it completely, but it's exciting.

**C** Christopher Conover 04:12

Some of the things you just mentioned are dyes, and seven of the 11 specifics you mentioned in the bill are dyes,

**L** Leo Biasiucci 04:21

right.

**C** Christopher Conover 04:21

Is it the dyes in particular that are the problem, or is it food that's being dyed probably as a problem?

**L** Leo Biasiucci 04:29

Yeah. I mean, so I know for sure a lot of these dyes have the data themselves. So like the red 40, I know is being tied to things like ADHD and so, and it's funny, so you go to Europe and you see a product that's whether it's similar, it might even be the same company it could be. I'll give example, like I said, like, let's just say, a Powerade. And since it's banned, they're using a vegetable color instead of a red dye that's a synthetic option. And so I think that the data is now showing the scientific data showing that. These dyes are really a problem. And it even goes beyond that. And you'll see there's other additives, titanium dioxide and some other things that the data is now there to show. Okay, these are specific items that are really causing problems. Here's the data to back it. Here are countries that have already banned it, and so this is why my list, I made it. I wanted to make sure, when it was drawn up, that the data exists. I don't want to just be throwing things on a list that may or may not have problems or may not have scientific data to prove it, but these are the ones that I know the data is there. I know other countries have banned them, and that's my goal in committee, is to make sure I bring in the right people, the right specialist, the people that know more than I do, to explain why.

**C** Christopher Conover 05:46

talking about the bans, all of this stuff right now is legal in the US, approved by the Food and Drug Administration. But as you and I have said, you've been reading labels. A lot of people have been reading labels for years and years and years, the FDA, across multiple administrations, has not gotten on board on this. Did they miss the mark? And our food companies just putting profits over your health, my health, kids health?

L Leo Biasiucci 06:13

yeah. You know, that's a really good question, and it's a question that I think we all deserve an answer to, because it doesn't make sense to me, when you have all these other countries that are banning these products, and here we are in the US, and we're one of the only ones that still have it, when we're supposed to have, you know, be one of the obviously, I believe we're the greatest country in the world, and we should have the people in positions to make sure we're not providing our children, especially with these toxic ingredients. So the question becomes, why is that? Is it because, you know, the industry has just been able to do what they need to do to convince people, the FDA and whatnot, that these aren't problems? But you kind of go back to previous stuff, like with cigarettes. I mean, how long did it take, you know, for people to finally come to the conclusion that, okay, these, these are not healthy for people, but it took a long time because you have a great lobbying group. You have great you have people that are pushing back, and they're going to fight back. And I'm sure it's going to happen here as well. You're going to have people come back and say, it's not necessary to do this. I mean, and I don't know if it has to do with cost, you know, I think we all know when you go to buy an organic item, versus one that's been processed and has all these additives substantially higher. So maybe that's the reason that's something that I hope we get to the bottom too.

C Christopher Conover 06:13

You mentioned things like organic foods tend to be more expensive. Processed foods are cheap. School budgets are tight,

L Leo Biasiucci 07:36

right?

C Christopher Conover 07:37

There's nothing in this bill because it's not a budget bill to help schools with that, but we could be increasing school budgets. It might take more people to not just reheat frozen things. Is there any financial mechanism for this bill down the road?

L Leo Biasiucci 07:56

Yeah. So the great news is, when I did the research, I won the top things right? Because when you look at the products itself, in the data, shows how bad they are. I think everybody's going to agree, like, we need to take these things out of our our school lunches, primarily first, because either our children, we want to make sure they're obviously not ingesting this stuff. But the number one argument is always going to be money. My initial pushback is going to be, we're okay to send, you know how many billions of dollars overseas? I think, you know, right or wrong? I think Ukraine, we've sent, gosh, 150 million billions, excuse me, with a B, over the last couple years. So right away, I'm going to push back and say, I think it's more important, or equally important, at least, to make sure that we're investing in our children's health. There is a program called Try It Local. It came out during COVID. I have to re I'm not sure if it was during

the Trump administration or Biden administration. These dollar amounts were actually Arizona utilized about 4 million of it. And the whole purpose of this Try It Local was for schools to buy local, less processed items from their local markets. So a program already exists, and this is going to be my number one ask when I have the opportunity to speak to RFK Junior in their in the Trump administration, is, look, let's, let's put more money towards this program so that we don't have to worry about the financial side. Because I just, I don't think there should ever be a cap on how much money we spend to make sure our children are getting the right food, the proper nutrition, and we're not poisoning them. And it's not about so much banning as much as it is. You know, if a school is making pizza for their students, which the last thing I want to do is ban pizza from schools, because first being Italian, that would be a probably a sin in itself. But kids love pizza. But the good news is, is when I speak to my school districts, they're telling me, look, we make it from scratch. So that excites me, because then I know, okay, if we're making it from scratch, if they're making it from scratch, they can buy the dough that doesn't have these items. They can buy the sauce that doesn't have these items.

**C** Christopher Conover 09:54

As we wrap this up, you've mentioned working with RFK Junior, working with the new administration going to Washington, it sounds like there's going to have to be a lot of partnership in this. I know when I was a kid, and granted, that was back in the stone ages, and one of the things my mom always complained about is that the federal government, at the time, considered for school lunches, ketchup a vegetable. Now for me, that worked out really well, but maybe not so much for my, you know, my health is a kid. It sounds like this, really, at the end of the day, this is going to come down to the federal government. It's going to be more the states applying the pressure. You applying the pressure to RFK JR and the federal government to really pick this up.

**L** Leo Biasiucci 10:38

Yeah, and you're right. I mean, in the reason for that is because these are where the dollars are coming from, and the dollars are coming from the feds for school lunch programs and and so it is going to be a very big partnership between the federal government and the states. It's a reason why I even love the Try it Local program, because it's kind of the federal government might have their guidelines, but they're giving it back to the states to say, look, you know, you should be finding local foods and farmers markets and utilizing those when you can. And here are the dollars to do that. So it's kind of a just really a shift. You said you when you were a kid, and I was the same way. I look back and think about the pizza that I was being served, or the kind of foods. I mean, I don't even know if it was a living organism, or I can't even I think about like, how bad it looked and how just reheated and this and that. So I think we've come a long way already, but you're right. I mean, this has got to be just a shift in just our society on look, it's time to do the right thing, and it's time to make sure the one part of our population that is most important that we're taking care of them, because, you know they don't know what they don't know, and it's up to us as adults to say now we have the information. Let's make sure our children are getting the nutritious food that they deserve.

**C** Christopher Conover 11:50

All right. Well, thanks for spending some time to explain all this to us.

L Leo Biasiucci 11:53  
Absolutely appreciate it.

C Christopher Conover 11:54  
That was Arizona representative Leo Biasiucci. We have to note that after we talked with Representative Biasiucci and our topic experts, the U-S Food and Drug Administration announced it is banning Red Dye number 3, which is on the list of chemicals in the bill. You're listening to The Buzz. After the break, we ask health and school lunch experts about the bill. Stay with us.

N NPR promo 12:06  
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C Christopher Conover 12:22  
Welcome back to The Buzz. I'm Christopher Conover. We're looking at a bill that would ban ultra-processed foods from school-served meals this week. For an expert opinion on the 11 chemicals the bill would ban, we now turn to Dr Melanie Hingle. She's the Associate Director of the School of Nutritional Sciences and Wellness at the University of Arizona, I started by asking her if ultra-processed foods are as bad for our health as many say.

M Melanie Hingle 12:51  
Yes and no, and I'll explain why nutrition science is always changing and our evidence is always accumulating, and we Look at things in new ways, using new methods. But fundamentally, I think this, although they have been around a while, ultra processed foods. We have known for quite some time, they're not great for our health, but the evidence suggests, and we've looked at this through many different lenses in nutrition science, including lots of reviews of studies. So where they got a bunch of studies and looked at them, and they looked at something called a meta analysis, where they pool all the results of all the studies and look at the effects or relationships with human health. So we know that lots of ultra processed food in your diet is associated with greater risk of metabolic disease, of cardiovascular disease, of diabetes, for instance, and of overweight obesity.

C Christopher Conover 13:44  
Maybe we need to have some definitions, because I remember growing up hearing about

processed foods. Now we're hearing about Ultra processed foods. What's the difference? Or have we just rebranded them, for lack of a better term?

M Melanie Hingle 13:58

Yeah, yeah, there. There is a difference, at least from a nutrition science standpoint, maybe not so much from a consumer standpoint, although that will change too, I think, with new labeling coming into effect. So a processed food generally, is just something that's undergone some kind of transformation. Could be mechanical, things being cut up. It could be chemical, where you're having like a process, like fermentation happen or things added to it. And so since it was so general of a term, processed, nutrition scientists and others want to distinguish between just what happens to food when it's being packaged up and sent out to us, to get to us, versus some things have been added to it and has been changed substantively in a way that maybe isn't so good for health. So those ultra processed foods are different than just sort of your regular chopping, cutting, cleaning, getting ready for market, in that they have things added to them.

C Christopher Conover 14:52

So when it comes to processed into Ultra processed are there degrees of Ultra-processed. And I'm sure at the far end of ultra processed is many people's favorites, you know, hot dogs and things like that. And because we really don't know what's in those

M Melanie Hingle 15:09

nobody knows.

C Christopher Conover 15:10

Nobody knows. But are there degrees of it?

M Melanie Hingle 15:14

Yeah, maybe not of ultra processed, but certainly, if you think of maybe the corollary, so no processing. Unprocessed or minimally processed foods are those that closely resemble where they came from, like from an animal or plant, so you would recognize them. So for example, an apple, if you just eat it on its own, it came off a tree that is unprocessed as it gets. You could have a minimally processed apple, which would be slices of apple because a piece of it has been taken away, like the seeds or the or the core that people don't usually eat. And then there would be maybe moving into that same example, ultra processed would be apple sauce with added sugar. So there are different sort of degrees of this, but generally, ultra processed means things have been added to it, whereas just minimally processed, unprocessed. Nothing's been added, only subtracted.

**C** Christopher Conover 16:04

So the bill the legislature is looking at has a list of ingredients that they're trying to get out of school lunches. How's that list doing? Good list, bad list, somewhere in between.

**M** Melanie Hingle 16:17

I think it's very in line with our health concerns overall, which are, of course, we want to prevent chronic disease, especially cancer, especially metabolic disease, which is, which is, there's a very high prevalence of here in the United States. The list I saw, the additives are really related to making food a certain color or preserving it, and none of those things are critical to human health. In fact, they are. Some of them are harmful, and they've been. The FDA has expressed concern about these. We've we've actually taken steps in the US government and FDA recently to explicitly ban or label, otherwise label these things. So I think that's a great start. It doesn't get into added sugars and fats and some other maybe nutrients of concern or ones that we want to moderate, but school lunch has those standards, and so I think maybe that's some of the rationale of just sort of focusing on the the colors and additives that we that we really don't need for our health.

**C** Christopher Conover 17:17

Some of the things on this list have been banned in places like Europe for years. The FDA has allowed them to be in our foods, be it school lunches or your lunch and my lunch or dinner or whatever. Why are we behind and have we seen a health difference in places like Europe that have had these bans?

**M** Melanie Hingle 17:40

Yeah, great. This is a great question. I think Europe has been ahead of us in a lot of ways and other parts of the world, not just Europe, in tackling this idea of ultra processed foods, and some of it's related to how we how we distribute food. Who lobbies? I think that's a big influence here. Who lobbies on behalf of our food production companies, is a very strong lobby in the United States on that. We've been sort of rejecting legislation that is viewed as overly regulating those things and people's choices, for instance, right? So I think we've been airing on that side more than sort of the safety health because of, again, not a lack of evidence, per se, but just sort of people's preferences for having this wide range of products available to them. I hope this moves us more toward the healthier choices I see labeling and I see these types of bills as being more guardrails. They're not restricting people's choices. They're simply saying these things really are not contributing to our health at all, and to just have them taken away is not going to impact the product. Maybe it'll change a little bit of how it might look, but again, overall, it will be the same thing fundamentally. It might not quite last as long as you're in your pantry or have that bright red color that some of those foods have.

**C** Christopher Conover 18:55

So if we were to dub you for a moment the czar of healthy eating, what do we as Americans need to be aware of when we're going down the aisles of the grocery store or preparing meals



...for ourselves or our family, maybe even out, you know, to dinner or lunch or breakfast?

**M** Melanie Hingle 19:17

Oh, I like this thought experiment. I would say that number one thing you can do is, I love the idea of focusing on more unprocessed and minimally processed foods. So if you are shopping at the grocery store or choosing your food, look around the grocery store and look for those foods that look familiar. Just by staring at them, you know what they are. They come from the tree. They come from animals that you recognize. They don't have a lot of things added to them. You can then take that, that to the aisles of the grocery store as well, and look at packaged foods. And the fewer ingredients those foods have, generally, the less processed they are. They have fewer additives. And again, all those things on that list that the bill, the Arizona bill, has, yeah, those should not be in your food, if at all possible. So all the additives and preservatives and emulsifiers and thickeners. Those are all extra things to make our food attractive, but they're not necessary for either the taste or the health of it. So I think that's a great start. Also, the label doesn't tell the whole story. You know, it was consulting with a nutrition person or just becoming generally aware of what are our healthier choices. You know, we have some dietary guidelines out there. Actually, a new version just came out to the public. So all the things you might suspect, you know, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean proteins, these are the things that are really important to be eating most of the time,

**C** Christopher Conover 20:33

all the things mom told me all those years, I guess, I guess I should love

**M** Melanie Hingle 20:36

she was right. She was right.

**C** Christopher Conover 20:38

Well, thanks for spending a little time with us.

**M** Melanie Hingle 20:39

My pleasure.

**C** Christopher Conover 20:40

That was nutritionist Dr Melanie Hingle. We wrap up this episode with someone whose work this bill would affect directly. Lindsay Aguilar, is the Food Services Director for the Tucson Unified School District. She starts by telling us how TUSD gets its food.

**L** Lindsay Aguilar 20:59

We operate the federal child nutrition programs. So that's the School Breakfast Program, the National School Lunch Program, the after school supper meal program, and then, of course, we have the Summer Food Service Program as well. So as far as where those meals come from, at TUSD, we have a food services department that leads and executes implements those programs across all 87 of our schools and in the community. We do Boys and Girls Clubs, supper meals. We in the summertime, we partner with Tucson Parks and Rec and other community locations to continue feeding children in our community or in the summertime. But the food, we have formal procurement processes that we have to abide by, which are very complex and very regulated. So we have bids for our foods that we kind of break up into categories the process of getting foods on our actual menu at TUSD, we have a team, an administrative team of dietitians, nutrition coordinators, chefs, culinary backgrounds, hospitality industry, you name it, a lot of professionals on our team that review all of these products. So we're looking at ingredients labels, what's in the food. We're looking at where it comes from. There is actually a component of the National School Lunch Program called Buy American, where we actually have regulation of foods that need to be purchased domestic, and if they're not available domestic or price points would lead us you take bananas. Those are not a domestic item. So bananas have to come from somewhere else. But there's actual processes that we have to go through in terms of where the food comes from, where it's produced, labels, nutrition facts. Nutritional information is a huge component. So we're looking at not just the meal pattern, requirements that are regulated for this federal program, calories, all of the micro macronutrients, sodium, all the how it's going to come together to meet our requirements for the menu. We're also looking at venue, vendors and manufacturers.

**C** Christopher Conover 23:06

How many meals, I guess a day, on an average day, is TUSD serving?

**L** Lindsay Aguilar 23:14

So currently, we're serving about just over 7000 breakfasts a day and around 30,000 lunches a day.

**C** Christopher Conover 23:22

You mentioned federal requirements. You know, I remember growing up as a kid, my mom talking about, oh, well, this is federally required, you know, that there be certain fruits or vegetables, or what is a fruit or a vegetable and things like that. How strict are those requirements that you all have to deal with?

**L** Lindsay Aguilar 23:41

It's broken down into what's called a meal pattern. So essentially, a school lunch in the United States, the requirements are a minimum of comes out to about two ounces of protein, two ounces of whole grain. We have to offer one cup of fruit and one cup of vegetable, with a

student taking a half cup minimum portion, and then, of course, the eight ounces of fluid milk. So that meal has to then meet certain calorie levels. There's thresholds ranges depending on the grade level. So it's broken down. Obviously elementary, middle, high students have different nutritional needs, so obviously High School, the portions are going to be more calories than a kindergarten student. And then within that meal pattern, there's actually it's broken down even further with, you know, no trans fat. There's limits on saturated fat. I already mentioned the ranges of calories, sodium restrictions coming soon, with the most recent nutritional standards that will be implemented in the coming years. There's now added sugar standards that we have to implement, and there's also subgroups of vegetables.

**C** Christopher Conover 24:51

So does the lettuce on my sandwich count as a vegetable?

**L** Lindsay Aguilar 24:54


Not if it's a iceberg, it has to be, for example, Romaine or a dark green leaf. So yeah, iceberg does not count as a dark green vegetable, and we don't use Iceberg lettuce in our program here at TUSD because it doesn't have much nutritional value.


**C** Christopher Conover 25:12


So you mentioned a minute ago, changes to the requirements, sodium, trans fats, added sugars. This bill that's been proposed in the legislature deals with a lot of more chemical additives and dyes and things like that. If this were to pass, and it sounds like changes are made from the federal level on a fairly regular basis, how difficult is it to implement those kinds of changes?


**L** Lindsay Aguilar 25:43

So whenever there's regulatory changes, or at the state and local level, often, if it's not a federal requirement, that can create some challenges for local operators in terms of being able to find products that perhaps you know, have these specific requirements. But I can also say that over the last decade, with the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act being changes that were implemented, and over the course, updated standards, then manufacturers have really done a tremendous job of really, you know, looking at ingredients and labels and taking, you know, things out that you know, I'm a registered dietitian. A lot of school district operators are or have culinary nutrition backgrounds, looking at products for schools that you know have more clean labels, things that you know we always say if you can't pronounce, you know, the the words on a label, you know, that could be a red flag, right? So, and there are a lot of initiatives, you know, around the country, or local districts that are really, you know, doing things to identify those things, or even have their own kind of internal processes in terms of what they're looking for, communicating to the manufacturers or vendors. And a lot of times, you know, as things become, you know, state legislative changes, or possibly even federal then obviously, you know, manufacturers definitely start to, you know, review those, those types of changes that are needed in our food system.

 Christopher Conover 27:15  
All right. Well, thanks for explaining all this to us.

 Lindsay Aguilar 27:18  
Absolutely happy to

 Christopher Conover 27:20  
that was Tucson unified school district Food Services Director, Lindsay Aguilar, and that's The Buzz for this week. You can find all our episodes online at [azpm.org](http://azpm.org) and subscribe to our show wherever you get your podcast, just search for The Buzz Arizona. We're also on the NPR app. Zac Ziegler is our producer, with production help from Maggie farmer, Our music is by Enter the Haggis. I'm Christopher Conover. Thanks for listening.

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