

School districts push back on federal lunch menu

By Tom Hamburger, Washington Post

In Georgia, kids resisted the loss of their beloved fried chicken. In New Mexico, whole-wheat tortillas went straight to the trash can. And in Tennessee, after schools replaced familiar flaky white biscuits with a whole-grain variety, one official reported a “severe amount of rejection.”

What began as an effort led by first lady Michelle Obama to serve more-healthy food to American schoolchildren has turned into a clash of cultures across the country – and, now, a high-profile Washington lobbying battle.

At stake in the argument over lunch menus, beyond the natural tension between nutrition and children’s taste buds, are the profits of several large food companies that sell frozen pizzas, french fries and other prepared foods to schools.

The dispute provides a fresh illustration of the ways special interests can assert power in Washington. In this case, food companies forged an alliance with a key lobbying group, the School Nutrition Association, and pushed it to shift its position from publicly supporting the Obama-backed standards to pressing Congress for relief.

On Thursday, a House committee voted for a Republican-backed measure that would allow school districts to temporarily opt out of the nutrition standards, which were passed in 2010 with the support of the White House and set mandates to reduce sodium and increase whole grains and servings of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The party-line vote served as a rebuke of sorts to the first lady, who has made curbing childhood obesity a priority and

delivered a series of public pronouncements in recent days decrying the opt-out proposal as a full embrace of junk food.

The measure is expected to be considered later this summer when House and Senate members meet to negotiate spending bills.

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