Fast-food Standards for Meat Top Those for School Lunches

In the past three years, the government has provided the nation's schools with millions of pounds of beef and chicken that wouldn't meet the quality or safety standards of many fast-food restaurants, from [Jack in the Box](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Jack+in+the+Box)and other burger places to chicken chains such as [KFC](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Companies/Food+and+beverage,+Agriculture,+Chemical/Kentucky+Fried+Chicken), a USA TODAY investigation found.  
The U.S. Department of Agriculture says the meat it buys for the National School Lunch Program "meets or exceeds standards in commercial products."  
  
That isn't always the case. McDonald's, Burger King and Costco, for instance, are far more rigorous in checking for bacteria and dangerous pathogens. They test the ground beef they buy five to 10 times more often than the USDA tests beef made for schools during a typical production day.  
  
And the limits Jack in the Box and other big retailers set for certain bacteria in their burgers are up to 10 times more stringent than what the USDA sets for school beef.  
  
For chicken, the USDA has supplied schools with thousands of tons of meat from old birds that might otherwise go to compost or pet food. Called "spent hens" because they're past their egg-laying prime, the chickens don't pass muster with Colonel Sanders— KFC won't buy them — and they don't pass the soup test, either. The Campbell Soup Company says it stopped using them a decade ago based on "quality considerations."