Tips for Educators on Supporting Healthy School Meals

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently updated the nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Ensuring that school meals are healthy and in line with current nutrition science is important for kids’ health and academic success. Research shows that students who do not have reliable, healthy meals in kindergarten are noticeably behind their peers in reading and math by the third grade. Teachers and other school staff can play an important role in helping to ensure these standards are implemented successfully and that children are willing to try new options.

Here are some ways you can support healthy school meals:

✓ Speak positively about school breakfasts and lunches, and encourage your students to try the new meals even if they contain unfamiliar foods.

✓ Talk to your students about the new school lunches. Find out what they like/dislike, and use this as an opportunity to report back to the cafeteria staff.

✓ Serve as a role model by occasionally eating school lunch with your students.

✓ Incorporate nutrition education into your curriculum to help students understand the importance of healthy eating.

✓ Support the overall message of healthy eating by:
  o Serving healthier items during class parties
  o Using non-food rewards in the classroom

✓ Implement a snack policy in your classroom:
  o Send a healthy snack tip sheet home to parents to encourage healthy snack options.
  o If you offer snacks in your classroom, stick to healthy options like fruits, veggies, whole grains, and low-fat dairy.

✓ Help keep parents informed about improvements to school foods by including information in class newsletters, letters home, back-to-school nights, school websites, etc.

✓ Use healthier fundraising options if you advise a school club or hold class fundraisers.

✓ Get involved by joining your school or district wellness committee.

✓ Learn how you can take action to support healthy options in all venues where food is sold in school by visiting BagtheJunk.org.
Even the healthiest foods are only healthy if they are actually eaten. When you first serve a fruit or vegetable, you may not get the reaction you desire. But the good news is that kids will and do eat healthy foods. Sometimes it just takes a little creativity on the part of parents or schools. Below are ideas to help.

- **Offer healthy options over and over and over and over and...** Children are naturally resistant to new foods. They may not be interested in trying unfamiliar foods or may not enjoy what they try the first time around. Don’t assume that just because they didn’t eat it once they won’t eat it ever again. Reintroduce foods every once in a while and expect that it might take 3, 5, even 7 introductions for children to develop an acceptance of new school foods.

- **Offer samples.** Many schools (and parents!) have found that taste tests of new menu items helps increase sales of those foods. One school offers “Try It Tuesdays,” where a sample of new food is offered along with more familiar foods.

- **Involve young people in menu development or even food preparation.** Have them vote on new menu items, hold discussion groups, discuss at a student council meeting, etc. Children may resist changes, but if they understand the reason for the changes and get to help choose the new foods, they will be more open to new selections. Some schools have “junior chef” contests where winning student recipes are added to the menu.

- **Do as I do...not as I say.** It’s easy to tell young people to eat healthier foods, but if we’re telling them and not showing them, we’re less likely to be effective. One of the most valuable things ‘grown ups’ can do is to eat the fruits, vegetables, and other healthier items we want our kids to eat. This type of modeling encourages kids to try new foods, especially when they see adults enjoying them so much!

- **Hungry kids will eat healthy foods if those are the options available.** If you give a child the option between an apple or a cookie, most will choose a cookie. But if you give them a choice between an apple and grapes, they will choose an apple or grapes—and both are great options! One of the tricks to getting kids to try and enjoy healthy foods is to avoid presenting them against unhealthy options. Whether it is at school or at home, if we surround children with healthy choices, they will learn to choose and eat healthy foods.

- **A little marketing can go a long way.** Try giving foods fun names, presenting them in attractive ways, and making them more appealing. Place healthy options in areas that are readily visible and accessible to kids. For example, offer fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy at the start of the line as well as at point of purchase so that they take them first or can be ‘reminded’ to grab one just before they leave. One school that physically moved its salad bar so students passed it before they went to the front of the serving line found an increase in students choosing those items!

- **It’s OK to encourage, but try not to obsess.** Letting children know that something is delicious and good for them and encouraging them to try a bite is a good way to get them to warm up to a new food. But if we focus too much on ‘making’ them eat what they don’t want, it is more likely to become a battle of wills and less likely to result in them actually eating healthier options.
School Lunches Get a Makeover

You may have heard that the nutrition standards for school meals were recently updated. But what does that mean for your child?

The National School Lunch Program provides meals to tens of millions of children each day, accounting for a significant portion of students’ recommended daily calorie needs. In exchange for participating in the National School Lunch Program (which sets minimum nutrition guidelines for meals), schools receive a reimbursement for each qualifying meal provided in school. Your school also can receive an additional reimbursement of six cents per lunch if they meet the updated standards.

Why new school lunch standards?

You’ve probably heard the facts before: Over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in the United States have tripled. Today, more than 23 million children and teens are overweight or obese, which places them at increased risk for serious diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Ensuring that school meals are healthy and in line with current nutrition science is important for kids’ health as well as for academics. Research shows that students who do not have reliable, healthy meals in kindergarten are noticeably behind their peers in reading and math by the third grade.

Given these concerns and advancements in nutrition, school nutrition standards were recently updated and school nutrition programs across the country are working to make school lunches healthier.

Healthier school meals: What’s on the menu?

The school lunch changes include more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; a shift to low-fat or nonfat milk; and limits on calories, sodium, and unhealthy fats.
### School Lunch Makeover: Before and After

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fruits</strong></td>
<td>½ - ¾ cup per day (fruit and vegetable combined)</td>
<td>½ - 1 cup per day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vegetables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>¼ - 1 cup per day (with weekly amounts of specific types)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meat/meat alternative</strong>*</td>
<td>At least 1-2 oz per day</td>
<td>Grades K – 5: at least 1 oz per day, 8 – 10 oz eq per week Grades 6 – 8: at least 1 oz per day, 9 – 10 oz eq per week Grades 9 – 12: at least 2 oz per day, 10 – 12 oz eq per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grains</strong>*</td>
<td>At least 1 serving per day, and 8 servings per week across all grades</td>
<td>Grades K – 5: 1 oz per day, 8 – 9 oz eq per week Grades 6 – 8: 1 oz per day, 8 – 10 oz eq per week Grades 9 – 12: 2 oz per day, 10 – 12 oz eq per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whole grains</strong></td>
<td>Encouraged, but not required</td>
<td>At least half of grains served should be whole grain-rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Milk</strong></td>
<td>1 cup per day (variety of fat contents allowed)</td>
<td>1 cup per day of low fat (1% fat) or nonfat milk. Only nonfat milk can be flavored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Calories maximums (averaged across the week)</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Grades K – 5: 650 calories Grades 6 – 8: 700 calories Grades 9 – 12: 850 calories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sodium</strong></td>
<td>No limits</td>
<td>Target for 2014 – 2015 school year: Grades K – 5: less than 1230 mg per lunch Grades 6 – 8: less than 1360 per lunch Grades 9 – 12: less than 1420 per lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fat</strong></td>
<td>Saturated fat: &lt;10% of calories Trans fat: no limits</td>
<td>Saturated fat: &lt; 10% of calories Trans fat: 0 g</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*One ounce “equivalent” (eq) may be required for some foods in the meat and grain groups, because a different amount is needed to provide the “equivalent” nutritional value.

### Help support healthier school lunches

- See the improvements to school lunches firsthand; have lunch with your child.
- Review the school menu or ask your child what is being served.
- Contact your district to find out how you can support the healthy school meals.
  - Engage other parents to support the school nutrition program.
  - Offer to organize a taste test for new recipes and foods.
  - Join your school’s wellness policy or health committee (or start one).
  - Serve your child more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains at home so they are familiar with them at school.
- Congratulate your school on the hard work they’ve put in to improving the nutritional quality of school meals for our kids!

### Where can you get more information?

- [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday)
- [www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org](http://www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org)
- [www.schoolfoods.org](http://www.schoolfoods.org)
Tips for School Business Officers on Supporting Healthy School Meals

As a result of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has begun implementing updated nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. Healthy school meals are important because healthy children learn better. Research shows that students who do not have reliable, healthy meals in kindergarten are noticeably behind their peers in reading and math by the third grade. Healthy eating helps prevent diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, and helps children grow up to be healthier, more productive members of society.

Below are ways school business officers can help ensure the school meal standards are implemented successfully:

- **Apply** for the six cents per lunch reimbursement with your State Child Nutrition Program. If your school is meeting the new nutrition standards, you qualify for these additional funds.

- **Analyze** current paid meal and a la carte item prices to ensure they reflect the true cost of purchasing, preparing, and selling them, including indirect costs.
  - The average school uses revenues from its reimbursable meals to offset the cost of meals for upper-income students and a la carte foods, which is bad for the bottom-line and children’s health. A national meal cost study conducted by USDA found that revenues from non-reimbursable foods (such as foods sold a la carte) fell short of the cost of producing those foods by an average of 29 percent.

- **Price** a la carte items to ensure the school breakfast or lunch is the best deal for students.
  - By making the reimbursable meal more financially attractive to students, you can increase participation in the school meal programs. This is better for schools financially because when children purchase a meal rather than a la carte, schools receive both cash and commodity reimbursements from USDA (almost extra 50 cents per lunch).
• **Investigate** what indirect costs are being charged to food service in your district. Work to reduce indirect charges to make more funds available for healthy school foods.
  - In some districts, food service programs are expected to pay for services that other school departments are not. For example, the science department does not pay for the electricity used in classrooms, the math department does not pay a share of janitors’ wages, and the art program does not budget for the superintendent’s salary. The more money a food service program pays in indirect costs, the less funding available for healthy school food.

• **Increase** participation in the school meal programs.
  - Encourage all students to apply for free meals. By encouraging all students to apply, you increase the number of eligible students applying to receive free and reduced-price lunches, and reduce stigma of submitting the paperwork.
  - Do not have a separate a la carte line in school cafeterias. Placing a la carte items in the regular meal line reduces stigma for students who receive free or reduced-priced meals and exposes all students to the school meals (so they can see the options and see that it is a good deal).
  - Increase school meal appeal. Present food attractively; cook vegetables to preserve vibrant color; vary the cuts of fruits, vegetables, and sandwiches; use catchy or appealing names, like Zippin’ Zucchini or Southwest Chipotle Chicken Sandwich; etc.

• **Implement** cafeteria practices that promote healthy choices.
  - Look at the set up of the cafeteria. Are there other cafeteria configurations that would promote better student flow and selections?
  - Change the placement and prominence of healthier choices. For example, place plain milk closer to the students than chocolate milk, have healthier options before less healthy options in the serving lines, place fruit in colorful bowls, etc.

• **Reduce** plate waste. Make sure students not only participate in the meal programs, but actually eat the healthy options.
  - Get students involved. Engage students to be ambassadors for the programs, conduct taste tests, have students vote on their favorite meal options, conduct student-led school food marketing campaigns, hold recipe contests, etc.
  - Engage parents. Send a letter or include messages in the school newsletter or website about the improvements to school meals. Provide tips for how parents can reinforce healthy eating at home, invite parents to eat lunch at school, have taste
tests and a school nutrition table at parent nights, encourage parents to participate on a school wellness policy or health committee, etc.

- Conduct taste tests of new fruit, vegetable, and whole grain offerings to familiarize students with healthy items and help food service determine which options students enjoy most. Ask community groups, food banks, or parents to volunteer.

- **Implement** healthy fundraisers in your school.
  - Healthy fundraisers set a positive example and support nutrition education, healthy eating by children, and parents’ efforts to feed their children healthfully. Schools have found healthy fundraising options to be practical and profitable.

**Resources**

- **School Meal Funds**
  - Fact Sheet: Cost of New Meal Standards (CSPI)
  - Paid Lunch Equity Tool (USDA)
  - Indirect Costs Powerpoint Presentation (School Nutrition Association)

- **Increase Participation and Reduce Plate Waste**
  - Tip Sheet for Increasing Meal Appeal (CSPI)
  - Smarter Lunchrooms: Arrange Lunchroom to Promote Healthy Eating (Cornell University)
    [http://smarterlunchrooms.org/start.html](http://smarterlunchrooms.org/start.html)
  - Fact Sheet: Improving Access to Healthy Meals (Food Research and Action Center)
  - Fruit and Vegetables Galore: Increase Meal Appeal (USDA)
  - Recipe Contests (Fuel Up to Play 60)

- **Fundraisers**
  - Sweet Deals: School Fundraising Can Be Healthy and Profitable (CSPI)
  - Fundraising Ideas Fact Sheet (CSPI)
  - Fundraising Success Stories (CSPI)