

School Lunch Myths

Myth: School lunch does not provide enough calories for active, growing children.

Truth: School lunches are designed to meet approximately one-third of children's daily calorie needs. The calorie ranges specified by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service for school lunches meet this requirement for the vast majority of children.

Myth: School cafeterias only serve prepackaged food.

Truth: The Iowa Department of Education's Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program (FFVP) and the Iowa Department of Agriculture's Farm-to-School Program work to ensure that children eating school lunch have access to a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, many grown by Iowa farmers.^{1,2}

Myth: Frozen fruits and vegetables are not as healthy as fresh.

Truth: In the winter months, fresh produce can be scarce or expensive. Luckily, frozen fruits and vegetables provide the same nutrients as fresh. In fact, flash-freezing fruits and vegetables at the peak of ripeness preserves their nutritional value, so they are actually more nutritious than fresh fruits and veggies that have been sitting around for awhile.³

Myth: Parents have no control over what is served at school lunch.

Truth: Parents can get involved with the lunch program at their child's school in a number of ways. Talk with your food service director.

Myth: The money parents pay covers the entire cost of school lunch.

Truth: School lunches cost schools more than what parents pay for them. To help cover the additional cost, schools receive cash reimbursement from the federal government for each school lunch they serve. Schools with a high percentage of students on free or reduced lunch receive larger reimbursements. Also, schools that meet the updated meal requirements receive an additional six cents of federal reimbursement for each meal served.⁴

¹ Iowa Department of Education. (2012). Fresh fruit & vegetable program. Retrieved from http://educateiowa.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=368&Itemid=434

² Iowa Department of Agriculture. (2013). Farm-to-school program. Retrieved from <http://www.iowaagriculture.gov/AgDiversification/farmToSchoolProgram.asp>

³ Magee, E. Frozen vegetables are hot! WebMD Weight Loss Clinic. Retrieved from <http://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/features/frozen-vegetables-are-hot>

⁴ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2012). National school lunch program. Retrieved from <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/aboutlunch/nslfactsheet.pdf>

Myth: School lunch does not provide enough meat/protein for growing children.

Truth: By law, school lunches must provide an average of one-third of a child's daily requirements of protein, calcium, iron, and Vitamins A and C.⁵ Keep in mind that even extremely active children require just 6 -7 ounces of protein foods per day.⁶ This is equivalent to two deck-of-cards sized pieces of meat or three large eggs.

Myth: Most school food is agricultural surplus from the USDA.

Truth: USDA Foods, a government commodity program, provides 15 to 20 percent of the food served at school lunch. Less than two percent of government commodity issued to schools is agricultural surplus. The rest is carefully selected by school districts from a list of over 180 products. Once they have ordered food from USDA Foods, school districts decide whether and how the food will be processed before it is served to children. In recent years, USDA Foods has increased the number of healthy food choices available to schools, including whole grains, extra-lean ground beef, low-fat dairy, low-sodium poultry, and fruit packaged in light syrup, water, or juice.⁷

Myth: Serving healthier food at school will not help the childhood obesity problem in the U.S.

Truth: Children who eat school lunch consume approximately 31 percent of their daily calories at school. Children who eat school breakfast and school lunch consume over half of their daily calories at school.⁸ With such a large portion of children's daily food intake occurring at school, ensuring that school meals are nutritionally balanced could have a major impact on children's health. Healthy school meals alone will not solve the childhood obesity problem in the U.S., but they are a good place to start.

For more information, visit schoolmeals.educateiowa.gov

⁵ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. (2012). Nutrition standards in the national school lunch and school breakfast programs. Retrieved from <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2012-01-26/pdf/2012-1010.pdf>

⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2010). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 2010. 7th Edition, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing.

⁷ C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University. School food 101: USDA commodity foods in school lunch. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/School-Food-101-USDA-Commodity-Foods-in-School-Lunch-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ Mancino, L, Todd, J. E., Guthrie, J., & Lin, B. (2010). How food away from home affects children's diet quality. USDA Economic Research Service. Retrieved from http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/136261/err104_3_.pdf