

School Meals: Challenges and Opportunities

National School Meal Programs

Many school wellness advocates focus on school meal programs as an avenue for creating change. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) are federally assisted meal programs that provide nutritionally balanced lunches, breakfasts, snacks and some dinners to almost 32 million children at participating public and non-profit private schools. Participating schools receive cash subsidies and commodity foods from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. In exchange, they agree to meet federal nutrition requirements and to offer free and reduced-price meals to eligible children.¹ Schools must



follow the federal requirements, but decisions about specific foods to serve and how to prepare them are left up to local school food authorities.



“Kids who participate in school meal programs get roughly half of their calories each day at school...This is an extraordinary responsibility. But it’s also an opportunity. And it’s why one of the single most important things we can do to fight childhood obesity is to make those meals at school as healthy and nutritious as possible.”

~ Michelle Obama



Challenges of the NSLP

Complexity: The NSLP is highly complex, with practices and procedures that vary widely at state and local levels. This complexity makes it hard to understand for health professionals, advocates and the public.

Commodity Foods: The commodities program (USDA Foods) makes the NSLP more economically feasible for schools because of the amount of additional food it provides – usually 15-20% of the food that ends up on school lunch trays.² When the NSLP started, it had a dual purpose that continues today: to feed children and to make use of surplus agricultural commodities (unprocessed or partially processed foods) owned by the government as a result of price-support agreements with farmers. The available foods vary from year to year, typically including meat, poultry, eggs, cheese, grain products, fruits and vegetables (including a relatively large percentage of potatoes).³ USDA has made significant strides to include healthier items, but is restrained by inadequate incentives for the promotion of good nutrition and a limited ability to provide fresh and/or local produce.⁴

Cost: Schools that participate in the NSLP receive reimbursements for each meal they serve. The reimbursement rate changes annually, and must cover, not only the cost of food, but also the cost of labor, equipment, and overhead. In a typical year, about two-thirds of a school’s reimbursement for each meal must go to cover the cost of running the program, leaving less than \$1.00 to purchase food.⁵

Facilities and Human Resources: Due to rising labor costs, a shortage of trained labor and the popularity and availability of convenience foods, many schools prepare meals by reheating frozen foods and opening canned goods. Other schools use outside contractors. As a result, many schools are not equipped to cook food from scratch.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) secured historic reforms to school meals and the entire school food environment. Improving child nutrition is the focal point of this

The Cost of School Lunch

“There’s just a dollar spent on food in the average school lunch...Budgeting for thousands of wholesome, appetizing, kid-friendly meals on a daily basis is easily compared to a high-wire act. It requires a near-microscopic focus on where every cent goes, and relentless, expert balancing of the nutritional, esthetic, and financial value of every single choice.”

~ School Food Focus.

“School Food 101 – The Cost of School Lunch.”

landmark legislation. It authorizes funding and sets policy for USDA's core child nutrition programs including the NSLP, the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and the Summer Food Service Program, among others.

The HHFKA:⁶

- Requires USDA to update the school meal program standards
- Adds six cents to the federal reimbursement rate for lunches that meet the new standards
- Allows USDA to establish nutrition standards for ALL foods sold on campus during the school day
- Provides training on purchasing, processing and preparation of more healthful USDA Foods (commodities)
- Helps communities establish local farm-to-school networks and school gardens
- Strengthens local school wellness policies by requiring an implementation plan, more transparency and opportunities for public input
- Allows only lower-fat milk options to be served at school meals
- Requires water to be available free of charge during meal service

In January 2012, USDA and First Lady Michelle Obama announced new, stricter standards for school meals. The new standards:⁷

- Ensure that students are offered both fruits and vegetables every day of the week
- Require a greater variety of vegetables
- Substantially increase whole grain-rich foods
- Limit calories to ensure proper portion sizes
- Reduce amounts of saturated fat, trans fats and sodium

This new “meal pattern” ensures that school lunches follow the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and resemble the USDA's My Plate icon and nutrition recommendations.

Common Food Service Concerns

Participation: Just like any other business, participation rates have to be a primary focus. School meals are rarely subsidized with district funds – they must pay for themselves. The more students who eat school meals, the more money food service managers have to meet program needs. They will have a hard time with any initiatives that they think might lower participation.

Pressure to serve meals kids will like: Food service managers want to make sure they're serving meals that kids enjoy. If they think that students will be less likely to buy healthier meals, they will be hesitant to incorporate changes.

Waste: Staff may feel that kids won't like healthier foods, resulting in more waste, especially of vegetables. No one wants to see food thrown away after just a bite or two.

Competitive foods: Less nutritious “a la carte” items are often sold in the cafeteria by food services in addition to federally reimbursable meals. Managers may consider them an essential source of revenue – particularly in districts with lower rates of free and reduced lunch reimbursement. Other school groups may sell their own foods and beverages through vending machines, school stores and fundraisers. This revenue does not go back to the school meal program. All are considered to be “competitive foods” – so-called because they compete with school meals for student dollars.

Not everyone agrees that schools need to sell unhealthy foods and beverages to be stable financially. Research is starting to show that's not always the case.⁸ In one study 80 percent of principals reported little or no change in revenue when they carried out a state policy restricting the sale of junk foods and soda.⁹

What Can Advocates Do?

1. **Establish a friendly relationship with food service personnel.** Introduce yourself and express interest in learning about how school meals work and the challenges they face. Understand their concerns (see box) before you suggest changes, and make it clear that you would like to work with them to make school meals healthier.
2. **Familiarize yourself with the nutrition standards that your district is required to follow at the federal, state and local level.** Read your district wellness policy – are there guidelines that pertain to food services and nutrition?





Are changes happening in other areas of the school environment? If not, food service managers may have reason to believe that the burden of creating healthier schools is unfairly on their shoulders.

3. Focus on maintaining or increasing participation as an essential part of your efforts to improve school meals.

- **Conduct a marketing campaign.** Try posters, newsletters, emails, flyers, offering information and samples at school events like Back to School Night, and doing taste tests with students and teachers – especially when introducing new items.
- **Ask adults to eat school meals with the kids.** If students see teachers, administrators or parents enjoying the food, they will be more likely to view it as desirable – try bringing in a local celebrity.
- **Conduct a focus group with students.** Ask them what they do and don't like about school meals. Lead a student club devoted to promoting healthier eating and improving school food. Student buy-in is essential to your success.
- **Educate parents.** Food service staff cite lack of nutrition education for parents as one of the greatest barriers to improving healthy food choices.¹⁰ Send easy-to-understand, approachable nutrition

If you choose to advocate for any of these changes, do it in a positive, understanding way, keeping in mind that there are many factors involved in making the school schedule and keeping the cafeteria running smoothly.

Schools Need Parents to Help

Schools want parents to take an active role in making healthier school meals a success. Encourage parents at your school to follow these tips from USDA's "The School Day just got Healthier Toolkit":

- Join your kids for lunch in the cafeteria.
- Review the school menu with your kids and encourage them to try the healthy foods that are offered.
- After school, ask your kids what was served and what they had for lunch.
- Show your kids that you enjoy fruits, vegetables and whole grains at meals and snacks, and show them that you are willing to try new foods.
- Discuss where vegetables, fruits, grains, dairy and protein foods come from and use grocery shopping as an opportunity to teach your kids about food and nutrition.
- Serve new foods offered in the cafeteria at home.

Learn more at www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday/toolkit.htm.

information home to parents. Check out local non-profits and your university cooperative extension services for resources.

- **Improve the cafeteria environment.** Work on visual appeal. A new coat of paint, attractive posters or better lighting can make a big difference.
- **Help with service.** Students may choose not to order school meals because it takes too long to get through the line, leaving them with too little time to eat. Ask if parent volunteers can help to speed things up.
- **Re-evaluate.** If your efforts to improve school food don't result in an increase in participation, re-evaluate. Is the food appealing and palatable to kids? Is it culturally appropriate for your student population? Is it affordable? If not, what else can you do to make it so?

Ideas for Improving School Meals

1. **Implement your school wellness policy.** Make sure that your district wellness policy is up-to-date and use it as a platform to make changes that will support and complement a healthy school meals program in the cafeteria and school-wide.
2. **Join or start a school wellness committee or school health advisory council (SHAC).** Support a healthier school food and physical activity culture through teamwork and commitment to initiatives in the cafeteria and beyond. Check out the AFHK Parent Toolkit online to learn more about building a wellness team: www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/ParentToolkit.

3. **Take on the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC).** The HUSSC is a voluntary certification program recognizing NSLP schools that have created healthier environments through the promotion of nutrition and physical activity. Parents can get involved by supporting and promoting the initiative and by helping to address areas related to nutrition education, health promotion, physical activity and the overall school food culture. Learn more at <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/healthierus/index.html>.
4. **Follow the Smarter Lunchrooms Initiative.** Research from the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics' Smarter Lunchrooms Initiative shows that small changes can increase sales of healthier items by more than 100%:¹¹
 - Make healthy foods more visible, convenient and attractive. Items displayed more visibly (at eye level, first in line, under a spotlight or in clear-glass cooler cases) are chosen more often. Add signs and colorful containers to attract attention to the healthy choices.
 - Use cool or appealing labels. One school doubled their carrot sales when they changed the name to "x-ray vision carrots." Burrito consumption increased by over 40% when they were labeled as "Big Bad Bean Burritos."
 - Use signs, verbal prompts and suggestive selling. The cafeteria staff and other adults can use prompts such as "Would you like a salad with that pizza?" or "Where is your vegetable on that tray?" Posters of athletes and other role models promoting healthy foods can encourage students to make healthier choices. Learn more at <http://smarterlunchrooms.org/>.
5. **Look into the Department of Defense Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program.** Known as DoD Fresh and available in some areas, this program is part of the USDA's efforts to provide schools with a wider variety of fresh produce: www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/dod/default.htm.
6. **Add a salad bar.** Visit www.saladbars2schools.org to see if your school qualifies for a salad bar grant through a "Let's Move" initiative. Understand that there are many factors to consider related to staffing, logistics, space, waste and making sure meals are reimbursable.
7. **Consider a Farm to School or Garden to Cafeteria program.** Farm to School connects K-12 schools and local farms with the objectives of improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities and supporting local and regional farmers. Learn more at www.farmtoschool.org. Garden to Cafeteria incorporates produce from school gardens into school meals. For a project manual, visit www.thelunchbox.org.



[org/sites/default/files/ProjectManual-Garden%20To%20Cafeteria.pdf](http://www.thelunchbox.org/sites/default/files/ProjectManual-Garden%20To%20Cafeteria.pdf). Be sure to research any state health requirements related to these programs.

8. **Look at lunch period timing.** Experts recommend that students be allowed twenty minutes to eat **after** they arrive at the table with their food. Does your district have any minimum requirements? Or promote **Recess before Lunch** – kids tend to eat a better lunch if they've already had their time on the playground, leading to less waste, better behavior and performance.^{12,13} Learn more at <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/healthierus-school-challenge-resources/recess-recess-lunch>.
9. **Consider scratch-cooking.** "Cooking from scratch" programs, where homemade meals are cooked every day, either on-site at schools or at district facilities, require an immense amount of time, effort, and money. Work with your nutrition services department to research options. Check out funding sources in your state that could help with the cost, especially if your school or district serves a high free and reduced-lunch population. Check out www.thelunchbox.org for ideas.
10. **Use Game On! The Ultimate School Wellness Challenge or Fuel Up to Play 60.** Both frameworks provide tools to jumpstart ongoing and coordinated nutrition and physical activity programs at your school, complementing

healthy school meals with activities like taste tests and nutrition challenges. Both of these free programs encourage student involvement. Learn more at www.actionforhealthykids.org/game-on/ and www.fueluptoplay60.com.



"I can understand being fed up with school lunch...I am not defending poorly performing school meal programs... What I can tell you is that child nutrition programs in every state are doing amazing things with school lunch... against all odds. What school nutrition programs need to make successful, sustainable changes is your support and involvement. If you come to the table with concrete, realistic solutions for change in small steps, I believe that most school nutrition programs will be open to your ideas."¹⁴

~ Dayle Hayes, MS, RD
2010-2011 Chair, School Nutrition Services DPG
Montana AFHK



Breakfast Programs

Look into starting an alternative breakfast program if your school doesn't already have one. Studies show that eating a healthy breakfast improves children's educational performance, behavior and health.¹⁵ Many kids who are eligible for free or reduced-rate breakfasts don't take advantage of traditional, before-school programs because of transportation issues or because they're concerned about the stigma. Any of the following models are great ways to make sure that all students start the day with a good meal.

- Breakfast in the Classroom – Breakfast is delivered to each classroom before the bell rings and students eat at their desks in 10-12 minutes while attendance, announcements, read-alouds or daily exercises are completed.
- Grab 'n' Go Breakfast – Serving carts are located throughout the school or near entrances for easy student access to 'grab' and take into the classroom.
- Breakfast on the Bus – A Grab 'n' Go breakfast is offered to students as they load the bus.
- Breakfast After 1st Period or Second Chance Breakfast – These provide serving alternatives for secondary students who are more likely to eat later in the morning.

Making a Difference: Fresh Approach, Eagle County, Colorado

Fed up with the processed foods served in school lunch, parents in Eagle County, Colorado, banded together to create Fresh Approach, a district-wide coalition working to improve school meals. Working with the district's director of nutritional services, they piloted a scratch cooking program at one of their elementary schools. Students now enjoy homemade meals (made with stealth cooking techniques, like putting butternut squash in mac and cheese) and a daily salad bar. Lunch participation has gone up by 25 percent. Fresh Approach invested considerable time and effort into fundraising; they have received several grants and they hosted a series of chef dinners at high-end local restaurants. Their efforts have paid off: the program is being expanded district-wide. Learn more at: www.eagleschools.net/freshapproach/.





RESOURCES

National School Lunch Program

National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity

- Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010
www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/NANASummaryHHFKA
- USDA Commodity Foods
www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/NANAcommodities

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation – Competitive Foods

- www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/her_research_briefs/hercompetfoodsresearchbrief.pdf

School Food Focus – Cost of School Lunch

- www.schoolfoodfocus.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/School-Food-101-Cost-of-School-Lunch1.pdf

USDA

- Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010
www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/legislation/cnr_2010.htm
- Comparison of Current and New Regulatory Requirements
www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Legislation/comparison.pdf
- Comparison of Current NSLP Meals vs. New Elementary Meals
www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Legislation/cnr_chart.pdf
- MyPlate
www.choosemyplate.gov/

School Breakfast Programs

Action for Healthy Kids

- Archived Breakfast Webinars under School Nutrition, Programs, Policies, and Practice
<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/events/webinars>
- Breakfast Information, Tipsheets and Materials
<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources/resource-clearing-house/search/summary>

The National Education Association – School Breakfast Guide

- www.neahin.org/educator-resources/start-school-with-breakfast.html

Endnotes

- 1 USDA. “National School Lunch Program.”
- 2 School Food Focus. “School Food 101: USDA Commodity Foods in School Lunch.”
- 3 National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. “USDA Foods: Commodities in the National School Lunch Program.”
- 4 Food Research and Action Center. “Commodity Foods and the Nutritional Quality of the National School Lunch Program: Historical Role, Current Operations, and Future Potential.”
- 5 School Food Focus. “School Food 101: The Cost of School Lunch.”
- 6 National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. “The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.”
- 7 http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday/pdf/28_PR0023.12.pdf
- 8 National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. “Implementing Strong Nutrition Standards for Schools: Financial Implications.”
- 9 West Virginia University, Robert C. Byrd Health Sciences Center, Health Research Center. West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Act: year one evaluation report. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University; 2009.
- 10 Brouse, C.H., Wolf, R.L., Basch, C.E. School food service directors’ perceptions of barriers to and strategies for improving the school food environment in the United States. International Journal of Health Promotion Education. Vol 47:3; 88-93.
- 11 Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs. “Smarter Lunchrooms Initiative: Six Guiding Principles that Improve School Lunch Eating Behaviors.”
- 12 Bergman, E.A., Buergel, N.S., Femrite, A., Englund, T.F. Relationships of Meal and Recess Schedules to Plate Waste in Elementary Schools. National Food Service Management Institute, R-71-03.
- 13 <http://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com/recess-before-lunch.htm>
- 14 School Meals That Rock (Guest Blog on “Fed Up with Lunch,” The School Lunch Project) <http://fedupwithlunch.com/2010/06/guest-blog-school-meals-that-rock/>
- 15 Food Research and Action Center. Child Nutrition Fact Sheet. “Breakfast for Learning: recent scientific research on the link between children’s nutrition and academic performance.”

The Parent Leadership Series

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) is the nation’s leading nonprofit and largest volunteer network fighting childhood obesity and undernourishment by working with school communities to improve nutrition and increase physical activity. Parents play a crucial role in creating healthy school cultures. The Parent Leadership Series was developed to provide parents and other community members with tools, knowledge and resources to help kids eat right and move more at school.

Learn more at <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org>.

Note: The websites listed in this document are provided as a service only to identify potentially useful ideas and resources for creating healthier school cultures. Action for Healthy Kids is not responsible for maintaining these external websites, nor does the listing of these sites constitute or imply endorsement of their content.

