

A la Carte



Objective

- *Increase the availability and sales of healthy food options and decrease the availability and sales of unhealthy food options for students and staff.*



Key Messages

Nutrition has a major impact on academic success.

- Children and teens who do not consume enough iron and vitamin C-rich foods – from foods such as meat, fish, leafy green vegetables, citrus fruits, peppers - often have poor cognition and lower academic performance.¹
- Tooth decay, which is often associated with consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages such as soda pop, can cause pain when untreated and impact school attendance.¹

Foods sold outside of the school meal program at school has a direct impact on dietary intake.²

- Foods sold outside of the school meal program in venues such as a la carte lines, vending machines, school stores, and concession stands are often high in calories, sugar, fat and salt, while lower in essential vitamins and minerals.³ Approximately 40% of students nationwide consume at least one of these foods on a typical school day.³
- On-campus vending machines with sugar-sweetened beverages contribute a significant source of unhealthy calories for children.³
- Students in schools where foods and drinks outside of the school meal program are available report lower intakes of fruits, vegetables and milk at lunch, as well as higher daily caloric intake from total and saturated fat.⁴⁻⁵

Studies indicate that schools that maintain strong nutrition standards are able to maintain financial stability.⁶

- Participation in school meals (reimbursable meals) has been reported to increase with the introduction of nutrition standards for vending and a la carte foods. This also demonstrates that an increased number of students are receiving healthier foods by participating in the meal program.⁶⁻⁷

Comprehensive school food and beverage policies have a positive impact on students' diets.⁷

- Policies that restrict the sale of unhealthy competitive foods have proven to reduce student consumption of chips, soda and candy.⁷
- Policies that restrict the sale of unhealthy competitive foods increase consumption of healthier options and emerging evidence suggests that such policies may also be associated with healthier student BMIs.⁷





Key Strategies

- **Work as a team to select healthier snack options.** Form an advisory group that includes food service staff, vendors, school administrators, building and/or district wellness leaders, school nurses, etc. Taste-test new a la carte options with students in a family and consumer science class or during the lunch period to determine the most popular items and get student buy-in on new selections before they appear on the line.
- **Understand and implement the USDA's new nutrition standards for all foods sold in school.** These are science-based nutrition standards for snack and entree foods and beverages sold outside of reimbursable meals to children at school during the school day. See the "key resources" section below for a link to the full set of standards.
- **Utilize product lists to select healthier substitutes for snacks and beverages.** (See lists in "key resources").
- **Work with your school's food service director.** Create a set of procedures to ensure the nutrition standards are utilized when procuring food.
- **Utilize the 4 P's of marketing.** Make foods available that students will enjoy, use promotional strategies, place healthy new options at eye level and price healthier options lower.
- **Maintain profitability.** Periodically examine sales data to ensure that healthy products are being purchased. If a product is not selling well, find a more popular substitute.



Sample Policy Language

"A la carte lines will be prohibited in all elementary schools."

"All foods and beverages for sale during the school day and outside of the meal program (i.e. a la carte, vending, school stores) shall meet USDA nutrition standards, ensuring the provision of whole grains, fruits and vegetables."

"Nutritious and appealing foods such as fruits, vegetables, low and non-fat dairy and whole grain products will be available wherever food is sold or offered in buildings during the school day."



Resources for Implementation

- **John Stalker Institute healthy snack list:** <http://www.johnstalkerinstitute.org/alist/alist.pdf>
- **Dakota Medical Foundation healthy snack list:**
<http://www.dakmed.org/uploads/resources/441/healthy-snack-list.pdf>
- **Smart Snacks in Schools USDA's All Foods Sold in Schools Standards:**
<http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/smartsnacks>

Henry Sibley High School, ISD 197, Mendota Heights, MN Healthy a la carte proves to be financially beneficial

After receiving the silver Healthier US School Challenge (HUSC) award at all of their five elementary schools, ISD 197 decided it was time to focus on improving the foods available at their two middle and one high school. One big road block was the proliferation of unhealthy a la carte foods at these buildings, including soda pop, sports drinks, large bottles of “juice” drinks loaded with sugar, cheesy nachos, salty soft pretzels with cheese-like dip, pastries, fried chips and cookies. These snack options compete with the federally reimbursed school lunch that contains options such as low-fat milk, whole grain pastas, rolls and crusts and a salad bar chockfull of fresh fruits and vegetables. The district started gradually by switching the chips used in nacho prep to a whole grain corn chip and reducing the portion size of cookies to a 1.5 ounce whole grain option. The following school year (2011-2012) the a la carte changes picked up speed when samples of healthier products were taste tested by middle and high school Family and Consumer Science students. These options included hummus and pita chips, a celery/peanut butter/raisin combo, air-popped popcorn with sodium-free seasoning and a cinnamon-filled pretzel. During winter break that year unhealthy options were removed and replaced with foods that met the Healthier US School Challenge nutrition standards (which are similar to the newly adopted USDA Smart Snacks in Schools standards). With additional sampling of new products and creative signage, the transition went fairly smoothly. Although there was a slight dip in sales, there was an increase in reimbursable lunch revenue indicating that students were nudged toward the healthier choices. See the table for more details on the shift from a la carte food sales to meals.

Year	Type A Revenue	A la Carte Revenue	Total Revenue
2006-2007	\$1,563,000	\$540,690	\$2,103,690
2007-2008	\$1,565,000	\$527,900	\$2,092,900
2008-2009	\$1,534,721	\$493,607	\$2,028,328
2009-2010	\$1,699,723	\$354,030	\$2,053,753
2010-2011	\$1,859,723	\$289,740	\$2,149,463
2011-2012	\$1,871,868	\$257,072	\$2,128,940

Sources:

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Smart Choices is a partnership of the Dakota County Public Health Department and school districts in Dakota County committed to making the healthy choice the easy choice by creating opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity before, during and after school.

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