

Classroom Celebrations



Objective

- Utilize non-food alternatives when celebrating birthdays, holidays and other classroom milestones, and decrease availability of unhealthy treats.



Key Messages

Elementary school students often consume foods high in calories and sugar during classroom parties.¹

- Classroom parties often shift the focus of the celebration to the food - not the student who is celebrating the birthday.
- Providing unhealthy foods during classroom celebrations contradicts lessons students receive on health and nutrition, and healthy classroom celebrations will reinforce healthy behaviors and health messages received via classroom curriculum.

Healthy celebrations support teachers' focus on teaching.

- Food-focused celebrations usually require a lot of time to serve and clean up, reducing instructional time.
- Non-food celebrations organized by the teacher may be integrated into the daily instructional plan to enhance learning in a fun manner.

Healthy celebrations promote equality among students.

- Birthday treats can be expensive and time consuming for parents or caregivers to prepare.
- When parents or caregivers are unable to afford birthday treats, their child may feel left out, resulting in hurt feelings on their birthday.

Non-food celebrations protect students with food allergies.

- There are an increasing number of students with food allergies and sensitivities.
- When parents send food to school, it is difficult to ensure the safety of children with food allergies.

There are many fun, creative alternatives to using unhealthy food when celebrating holidays, birthdays and other classroom milestones.

- Non-food celebration alternatives can recognize a child's birthday and make them feel special. Creative options include allowing a student to wear a birthday crown for the day or letting them choose an item such as a pencil or eraser from a class treasure box. (See "Key resources for implementation" section for ideas.)

Comprehensive school food and beverage policies have a positive impact on students' diets.²⁻³

- Classroom celebration policies reinforce other healthy food policies in the district.
- Policies that restrict the availability of unhealthy competitive foods (including in the classroom setting) have proven to reduce student consumption of chips, soda and candy.²
- For elementary school students, such policies were associated with reduced availability of sweets, regular-fat baked goods, ice cream, sugar-sweetened beverages and high-fat milk.³
- 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.²



Key Strategies

- **Gather key stakeholders such as principals, teachers and parents.** Create an advisory group to develop a healthy classroom celebration policy to limit the abundance of sugary treats children consume during instructional time.
- **Work with teachers to develop non-food celebration options.** Such celebrations should align with classroom instruction and not take too much time away from learning. There are several suggestions to get your school started in the “resources for implementation” folder.
- **Work with your school’s PTA/PTO to create healthy celebrations.** Since PTA/PTOs often sponsor school celebrations, ensure they’re aware of school and district policy changes, as well as fun, creative alternatives that other schools have used.
- **Inform families of the policy change and healthy food and non-food birthday celebration options.** Send alternative celebration suggestions and the school’s policy in a letter to families before the beginning of the school year and a reminder in other communications to ensure that everyone is on the same page. A sample letter is included in the “resources for implementation” folder.



Sample Policy Language

“Schools should limit celebrations that involve food during the school day to no more than one party per class per month. Each party should include no more than one food or beverage that does not meet nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold individually.”⁴

“The district wellness committee will disseminate a list of healthy party ideas to parents and teachers and will serve as a resource.”⁵

“The District recommends that during celebrations schools encourage the use of non-food related items and healthy food choices as suggested by the IOM Nutrition Standards.”⁶



Resources for Implementation

- **Healthy School Celebrations:**
<http://www.greeleyschools.org/cms/lib2/CO01001723/Centricity/Domain/3682/HKC%20Classroom%20Party%20Book.pdf>
- **Healthy School Celebrations (includes several ideas for birthdays and holidays):**
http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/healthy_school_celebrations.pdf
- **Halloween Party Ideas:** <http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/halloween.pdf>

Success Stories

ISD 191 Elementary Schools, Burnsville, Eagan, Savage, MN

Birthday treat-free policies established in 8 out of 10 elementary schools

After one elementary principal successfully implemented a policy to eliminate cupcakes, candy and other nutrient-poor “junk” food from student birthday celebrations, it didn’t take long for other principals to follow. It all began when the Smart Choices coordinator met with the principal who was contemplating ending birthday treats. The principal sent a parent letter in the spring outlining the rationale for the policy that would go into effect the next school year. A similar letter was sent to parents in the fall as a reminder. The birthday treat-free policy went off without any major problems; there were no parent complaints, no secretary was burdened with enforcing the new policy and only a few students forgot about the new rule and had to be gently reminded that treats weren’t allowed. Most teachers were on board with the new policy.

Following the success in his school, the principal discussed the pros and cons of the policy at a meeting of elementary principals, distributing copies of the parent letters. He emphasized that the treats were distracting and took time from classroom learning, and that focusing on food actually took the focus off celebrating the child’s birthday. He also noted that the pressure to provide treats could be a financial burden for some families. Principals were open to learning about and sharing information with teachers on alternative ways to celebrate a child’s birthday that didn’t involve food. One principal in the district gave each student a pencil on their birthday. Four more principals soon followed that next school year. Currently eight of the ten elementary schools have a treat-free birthday policy!

Sources:

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2. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2012). Influence of competitive food and beverage policies on children’s diets and childhood obesity. *Research Review, Bridging the Gap.* Retrieved online from http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/her_research_briefs/RRCompFoods7-2012.pdf
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4. Saint Paul Public Schools. (2006). Saint Paul Public Schools Wellness Policy. Retrieved online from http://ns.spps.org/uploads/533.00-Wellness_Policy.pdf
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6. Farmington School District. (2011). Farmington School District No. 192 wellness policy. Retrieved online from <http://chartwells.compass-usa.com/FARM/Documents/Wellness%20Policy-2012.pdf>

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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