

# School Lunch



## Objective

- *Lunchtime meal service will be designed to ensure that students consume a healthy lunch that at a minimum meets USDA meal standards.*



## Key Messages

### Nutrition has a major impact on academic success.

- Research indicates that students who do not get enough to eat at home score significantly lower in arithmetic. They were also more likely to repeat a grade, see a psychologist and have difficulty getting along with others at school.<sup>1</sup> Children and teens who do not consume enough iron and vitamin C-rich foods often have poor cognition and lower academic performance.<sup>2</sup>

### Foods sold at school have a direct impact on dietary intake.

- Children consume an estimated 19-50% of total calories at school on school days.<sup>3</sup>
- One study found that 6- to 13-year old students who received a revamped lunch menu that included foods packed with vitamins and minerals and health education curriculum had a significant decrease in blood pressure, weight and body mass index compared to students who did not receive the nutrition education and changes in meal offerings.<sup>4</sup>

### The USDA school meal standards are a minimum target.

- In states that exceed the USDA school meal standards, obesity prevalence among students was more than 12% lower than those schools in states that do not exceed the standards. In addition, the difference
- in obesity among students who qualify for free/reduced price lunch compared to those who consume meals from home was narrower in states that exceed the USDA nutrition standards.<sup>5</sup>

### USDA school meals improve students' diet quality and reduce plate waste.

- Compelling research demonstrates that students in schools that met the revised National School Lunch Program nutrition standards consume more nutritious meals; students consume more fruit, and schools generally offer a greater variety of fruit than before the standards were updated.<sup>5</sup>
- Schools also report less overall plate waste. Students throw away less of the entrees and vegetables which significantly lowers plate waste in school cafeterias.<sup>5-7</sup>





## Key Strategies

- **Contract with a dietitian to increase the number of healthy menu items.** Collaborating with a registered dietitian can be a great way to reduce saturated fat, sodium and added sugars in food options and increase healthy nutrient-rich food options, as well as introduce new, tasty recipes.
- **Include students and parents as stakeholders in the school lunch.** Students appreciate when their voices are heard and they have the opportunity to take on a leadership role in creating change such as taste testing new recipes, submitting favorite recipes for consideration, filling out diner forms that provide feedback on the dining environment and foods available, or suggestions for marketing campaigns. Parents can also participate in creating healthy lunch options by providing recipes to incorporate into the menu rotation.
- **Install equipment that makes it easier to serve healthy options.** Salad bars allow for a wide variety of fruits, vegetables and other healthy options to be served on the lunch line in grades K-12. Another option would be to install a cooler with a clear glass door to display refrigerated items such as yogurt parfaits, hummus and fruit smoothies. Also, consider the use of smaller equipment such as fruit and vegetable sectionizers which speed up produce preparation.
- **Reduce processed food items by training food service staff on basic whole food preparation skills.** Partner with a local organization such as a University Extension program, a public health agency or a chef, to learn skills such as: knife handling, how to preserve produce, how to read a food label, how to add flavor with spices and recreate simple scratch recipes, as well as other topics of interest.
- **Market your lunch program and the healthy options on the line.** Learn about incorporating strategies based on behavioral economics into your lunch line by checking out “The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement” website (below under “Resources for Implementation”). Beyond the setup of the lunch line and how food service staff interacts with students, the menu itself is also a great marketing tool either online or through other outlets such as school and district family newsletters.
- **Train adults in the cafeteria on techniques that encourage positive interaction with students.** Train cafeteria supervisors on “food coaching” concepts to discourage food waste of healthy meal items and increase the enjoyment of mealtimes. Plan to repeat this training annually if there’s high turnover of supervisors. Train food service staff on how to use positive verbal cues to “nudge” students to try healthy options.
- **Look as far as your backyard for sourcing food!** Consider teaming up with a school garden to source some of your food. See the USDA memo on this topic (below under “key resources”) and the school garden section of this toolkit for more information on how to make it happen! Another option would be to connect with a local farmer to source food locally. These actions present an opportunity to involve students and parents to increase understanding of the local food system.





## Sample Policy Language

“Ensure maximum participation in the school meal program by developing a coordinated, comprehensive outreach and promotion plan for the school meal programs.”<sup>9</sup>

“Ensure that the nutritional value of the food served significantly improves upon USDA Dietary Guidelines by providing nutritious, fresh, tasty, locally grown food that reflects the district’s cultural diversity.”<sup>9</sup>

“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.”<sup>9</sup>

“Serve meals in a pleasant environment with sufficient time for eating (a minimum of 20 minutes), while fostering good manners and respect for fellow students.”<sup>9</sup>

“Ensure that a full service kitchen will be installed at school sites where public bond money is expended to repair or remodel a school.”<sup>9</sup>



## Success Stories

### West Saint Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan, MN (ISD 197)

#### Salad bars in all 8 schools, K-12th grade

To increase access and availability of fresh produce in ISD 197 schools, Child Nutrition Director Jeff Wolfer collaborated with a dietitian consultant to apply for a Let’s Move Salad Bars to Schools grant to expand the salad bar operation beyond the secondary schools to also include the district’s five elementary schools. All five elementary schools received a generous salad bar donation from a local company, CH Robinson. Keys to success were training food service staff on salad bar operations and food safety, building student interest by offering taste testing of fruits and vegetables and having older children teach younger children how to use the salad bar.

### Saint Paul Public Schools, Saint Paul, MN – “Healthy Hits”

Saint Paul Public Schools have a unique process for generating “Healthy Hits” on the school meal menu. Recipes can be submitted online by students, parents or staff through a template posted on the Nutrition Services website. Nutrition Services evaluates the suggestions based on how healthy the recipe is, how feasible it is to make, and how likely it is that the kids will like it. If a recipe makes the first cut, the cost per serving is calculated, which must be approximately \$0.60/serving or less, and a nutritional analysis is conducted to ensure it meets requirements for calories, fat, saturated fat, sodium, etc. If a recipe still looks good on paper, then the kitchen creates small and large batch tests that then head to the mouths of their target audience - the students - for a taste test or sampling! If it’s kid-approved then it’s piloted at a school to gather additional feedback from students and staff. If participation numbers remain high after three times on the menu, it’s considered a “healthy hit” and is sure to reappear in the future!

**For additional success stories:** Check out school lunch success stories across the nation at:

<https://schoolnutrition.org/AboutSchoolMeals/SchoolNutritionSuccessStories/>

Just a sneak peek on what you’ll learn from some of the gems featured on this site:

- Schools host student taste tests and offer free samples to encourage kids to try healthier fare, gather feedback, and identify student favorites.
- Cafeterias dish up appealing ethnic recipes.
- Kid favorites are made healthy: school pizza is prepared with whole grain crust, low-fat cheese and reduced-sodium sauce.

Kids' Safe & Healthful Foods Project highlights a handful of districts that have excelled at increasing fruit and vegetable consumption by students by using thoughtful, creative approaches!  
<http://www.healthyschoolfoodsnow.org/school-food-success-stories/>

Also check out "Making It Happen! School Nutrition Success Stories" which illustrates a wide variety of approaches that schools across the country have taken to improve student nutrition.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/mih/index.htm>

## Resources for Implementation

- **Great Trays™ Toolkit for School Food Service:**  
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/health-and-nutrition/toolkits-and-resources/great-trays/>
- **University of Minnesota Extension Training for Food Service Professionals:**  
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/health-and-nutrition/professional-development/training-for-school-foodservice-professionals/>
- **The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement:** <http://smarterlunchrooms.org/about-us> and **Nudging in the Lunchroom**  
[http://foodpsychology.cornell.edu/outreach/nudge\\_lunch.html](http://foodpsychology.cornell.edu/outreach/nudge_lunch.html)
- **USDA memo RE: Farm to School and School Garden Expenses:** See Farm-to-School and School Garden sections of the toolkit for more information. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SP06-2015os.pdf>
- **A Field Guide to Salad Bars in Schools:**  
<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/hpcd/chp/cdr/nutrition/docsandpdf/guidetosbinschools.pdf>
- **Rethinking School Lunch: A Planning Framework from the Center for Ecoliteracy:**  
[http://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/uploads/rethinking\\_school\\_lunch\\_guide.pdf](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/uploads/rethinking_school_lunch_guide.pdf)
- **Model Lunch Menus:** <http://www.schoollunchinitiative.org/menus/calendars.shtml>
- **Public Health Law Center Resource Compilation** (procurement regulations and resources):  
<http://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/resources/resource-compilation-general-procurement-regulations-and-resources>

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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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