

# **New York Coalition for Healthy School Food**

## **School Food 101**

### **Introduction**

The obesity crisis is in full swing. We have a nation of overfed but malnourished children, with only 1% of children ages 2 – 19 eating in line with food guide pyramid, and 16% of children not meeting any of the recommendations.<sup>1</sup> Our kids are subsisting on processed foods (sugar, white flour, oil, artificial ingredients) and animal products, and barely getting any whole plant foods – the very foods that prevent disease (see pie chart).<sup>2</sup>

We can't blame this crisis on schools. Schools are not the cause of the problem but, like the rest of society, they are a part of it. And since schools are the place where children go to learn, school administrators and teachers have an obligation to set a good example – and to be consistent with what they are teaching (or “practice what they teach”.) Students find the lack of consistency hypocritical, and nutrition education means nothing when everything they see around them contradicts it.

### **Who's to blame?**

The problem in schools is not just in the cafeteria – there are mixed messages in the whole school environment. Breakfasts can consist of pancakes, French toast, sausage, bacon, and eggs, or white bagels with cheese. Class parties might offer cupcakes, brownies, potato chips, soda or other sugary artificially colored drinks, and a goody bag full of candy to take home. The math lesson might be provided compliments of a popular candy company, teaching children how to count using pieces of candy. Older children may be instructed to sell candy to raise money for the prom, class trip, or athletic team. Rewards of candy or fast food coupons from teachers for good behavior or school performance are rampant. Vending machines sell sodas, “sports” drinks (which have nearly as much sugar as soda), deep fried snack foods such as potato chips, cookies and candy bars. Lunch might consist of “flash” fried chicken nuggets or mozzarella sticks, cheeseburgers, macaroni and cheese, canned peas, canned fruit cocktail, juice “drinks” containing high-fructose corn syrup, or high-fat and flavored milk. At the end of the lunch line, a la carte choices may include potato chips, ice cream, and cookies. School stores usually sell only processed foods. After school, at sporting events, donuts or pizza are common. While schools may have some healthy choices, the overall picture is dismal. According to Ann Cooper, “School food isn't about nutrition; it is a business in which the bottom line takes precedence over the health of the children being fed.” Actions speak louder than words, and we have to consider what message we are giving to students when we choose the food we will offer them.

But before you go blaming the food service director and cafeteria workers, it's important to understand that they work under difficult circumstances, in relation to finances, government regulations, trying to make everyone happy, and competing with all the unhealthy food outside the cafeteria. Unlike other departments in schools, the food service program is expected to pay for itself. It does not receive school budget money, nor does the price children pay for their meals cover expenses. This is really a major

problem – no other department in the school is expected to support itself! Imagine if the biology or math departments had to come up with their own funding.

### **What's the cost?**

The average cost to students for school breakfasts is \$.89 in elementary schools, \$.95 in middle schools, and \$.97 in high schools for those paying full price. Lunches average \$1.54 in elementary schools, \$1.72 in middle schools, and \$1.77 in high schools.

The federal government now reimburses schools \$2.47 for each child receiving a free lunch (those below 130% of the poverty line), \$2.07 for each child receiving a reduced price lunch (those between 130 – 185% of the poverty line), and \$.23 for those paying full price. About \$.2084 of this amount for the 2007/2008 school year will be in the form of commodity foods rather than cash for each lunch served. See more on commodity foods below.

For breakfast, schools are reimbursed \$1.35 for free meals, \$1.05 for reduced price meals, and \$.24 for fully paid meals.

Reimbursements for free and reduce price lunches are \$.02 more in “severe need” schools where 60% or more of students qualify for free meals. Reimbursements for free and reduce price breakfasts are \$.26 more in severe need schools. Some states, but not all, also provide an additional minimal reimbursement. For example, New York State provides an additional reimbursement of 6.5 cents for each free and full price lunch served and 21 cents for every reduced price lunch. Though pending legislation (summer 2007) may increase this amount.

With little more than \$2 to cover the costs of each lunch served, about \$.90 is available for food after labor, overhead, supplies, and repairs are factored in. Of that amount, \$.18 to .20 must be spent on milk, which is required to be offered (but not served).

Schools rely on these reimbursements for school meals, and must meet stringent regulations to qualify for them. Imagine for a moment trying to go out and purchase a full, balanced, and healthy meal, including a beverage, entrée, fruit, vegetable, and grain product for between \$1.60 and 2.32 each day in a restaurant or cafeteria. Then imagine being a food service director and trying to make it happen.

### **Menu Planning Systems**

Meals are provided under the guidance of the United States Department of Agriculture's National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. In order to be reimbursed for the school meals, meals must comply with one of several menu planning systems:

Food-Based Menu Planning system requires specific food components be served in certain amounts. With this system, you must work with four components — Meat /Meat Alternate, Grains/Breads, Vegetables/Fruits, and Milk — and two established age/grade groups for lunch (specifically, one for Grades K through 3, another for Grades 4 through 12). There's also been an optional age/grade group (for Grades 7 through 12.) The Food-Based system is the one that has traditionally been used, and has been in place since the

National School Lunch Program was established in 1946. It is based on the old four food groups. The plan is designed to provide, over time, 1/3 of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) for key nutrients for specific age/grade groups for lunch and 1/4 of the RDA for key nutrients for specific age/grade groups for breakfast. Because this system was designed before the Dietary Guidelines became part of school meal requirements, the meal plans do not have any *built-in* features that will help serve meals that comply with these guidelines. Extra thought needs to be given when planning meals that meet the nutrition goals — including target calorie levels — while reducing fat. Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning is similar to the traditional system above – but there are *different* established age/grade groups. And, there are increased servings of Vegetables/Fruits and Grains/Breads. In addition, it is designed to provide 1/3 of calorie needs for lunch and 1/4 of calorie needs for breakfast, in addition to the key nutrients. This system was designed to help ensure consistency with the Dietary Guidelines. Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP) takes a Nutrient-Based approach to menu planning. Instead of working with specific food components in specific amounts, the menu planner works with menu items. This approach requires a nutritional analysis of foods used in school meals. To do this, schools must use USDA-approved computer software that's widely available. The software is easy to use with heavily processed type foods, but whole food recipes need ingredients and their nutrient profile entered into the database, which can be a time consuming process (but only needs to be done once). When averaged over a school week, the menu nutrient analysis must provide 1/3 of the RDA for specific nutrients as well as 1/3 of calorie needs for each age or grade group for lunch and provide 1/4 of the RDA for specific nutrients as well 1/4 of calorie needs for each age or grade group for breakfast, and meet certain standards which help ensure that meals are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The same age/grade groups can be used as in Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning. Or, the computer software can customize optional age groups. Assisted NSMP is exactly like NSMP *except* an outside consultant or other agency performs all of the functions of menu planning and nutrient analysis. This system is used if a school does not have computer technology that will allow them to use NSMP. If computers become available, they can easily switch to NSMP.<sup>3</sup>

The School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) was initiated in 1995 to ensure that schools are working toward meeting more specific nutrition goals, including age-appropriate calorie goals and meeting the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Regardless of the menu planning option followed, breakfast and lunch menus, when averaged over a school week, should meet the nutrient standards for the selected age or grade group, including 1/3 of the recommended daily intake (RDI) for calories, protein, calcium, iron, vitamins A and C for lunches and 1/4 of the RDI for breakfast. They require that no more than 30 percent of calories come from fat, and that less than 10 percent of calories come from saturated fat. In addition they require the reduction of cholesterol and sodium and an increase in dietary fiber. Schools can expect to be reviewed at least every five years, and will receive technical assistance to help them meet these requirements if they are not doing so.

### **Balanced and nutritious meals, Offer versus Serve**

Food service directors have claimed that because their meals follow the menu planning systems and are passing School Meals Initiative inspections, that their meals are balanced and nutritious. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the School Meals Initiative recommend reducing cholesterol and increasing dietary fiber in school meals. Why then are most meals centered around meat and/or cheese? Animal products are the only source of cholesterol in the diet and plant foods are the only source of dietary fiber. Flash fried (at the manufacturers, baked at the school) chicken nuggets, white rice, canned peaches in light syrup, canned peas, and whole milk could fit into school guidelines, yet hardly seem like a healthy meal. One of the problems is that the school menus only have to meet the nutrient standards averaged over a week. The problem is that this doesn't mean anything for the individual child. A child could conceivably choose the higher fat menu items every day, such as a flash fried entrée and whole milk, and consume far more than 30 percent of calories from fat. The other reason that the SMI system may not be resulting in truly healthy meals is that it somehow misses the point that we need to eat more whole plant foods, and less meats, cheeses, refined and processed foods. Many of the meat products served to children in schools are very processed, and also very high in sodium.

In addition, most schools use an "offer versus serve" program, to reduce food waste and food costs, in which students choose from the various menu components. Students must choose at least three out of five components, and one of those must be the entrée. Offer versus serve must be implemented at the senior high level for lunch, but is optional for breakfasts at all levels and in the lower grades for lunch. However, schools that do not participate in offer versus serve must require students to take all five components in order to receive reimbursement from the federal government. It is not uncommon for children to choose the entrée and a drink, bypassing the vegetable and fruit components of the meal. In many cases this is because at the end of the lunch line, they can purchase potato chips, cookies, and ice cream. So the meals, in many cases, are not balanced, and are often not nutritious, even if they are following all of the requirements set by the federal government. On the other hand school food service does offer appropriate portion sizes, unlike most restaurants and what people are usually eating at home.

### **Commodity foods**

Tight budgets result in the reliance on commodity foods (foods provided by the federal government basically free of charge except for minimal transportation and storage fees). The commodity list changes somewhat from year to year. These commodity foods include raw ingredients which go directly to schools, and raw ingredients which are diverted to a manufacturer first and then sold to schools at a low cost. Except for orange juice, tomato paste, vegetable oil, and peanut butter, all other commodities that go to manufacturers for processing consist of meat, dairy and eggs, and usually end up on our children's cafeteria trays as the entrée. Examples include chicken nuggets and mozzarella sticks. Schools are entitled to foods valued at \$.2084 for lunch from the commodity program for the 2007 – 2008 school year. This amount includes carry over funds from the previous year. Some of the most popular commodity items include ground beef, cheese, chicken, and white potato products (many of which end up deep-fried). This is apparent if you look at school menus, with many featuring cheeseburgers, chicken nuggets, mozzarella cheese sticks, ham and cheese on a bagel, macaroni and cheese, and

French fries. Bonus commodities are also available when there are poor market conditions for producers resulting in surpluses.

If you look at the list of commodity foods available from the federal government, you will see that there are healthy items on it, such as brown rice, dried beans, orange juice, dried cherries, frozen sweet potatoes and other vegetables. However, that does not mean those items are available, or the best choice for a food service director from a business perspective. Each state orders the commodity foods from the federal government for its schools. In New York, food service directors fill out an online survey each year to determine what commodity foods they would like to obtain. There needs to be enough demand from food service directors in a given region in order to get a particular food from the list. That is because the food is shipped on trucks, and there needs to be enough demand for a particular food to justify shipping a whole truckload of it to a given area. In addition, food service managers need to get the most value for their money, and it makes more sense for them to order higher cost items such as beef or cheese from the commodity program, and then pay for lower cost items such as brown rice. A new system called ECOS (Electronic Commodity Ordering System) is now available to all states but may eventually be available at the district level (it's the state's decision), which may make it easier for districts to get what they want they want from the federal list, at least in smaller states.

The USDA commodity program has made some improvements over the last five years, and continues to evolve. They are working to improve the foods offered by lowering the fat, sugar, and sodium levels of the food they make available to schools.

### **Give them what they want**

Students are considered customers by food service personnel – and they are customers, but they are also children. Should we give them a cigarette or a beer if they wanted that? Of course not, but some of the foods served can cause just as much damage to their health. The regular consumption of foods high in fat, sodium and added sugars can result in premature death and disability. (A study last year in the Journal of the American Medical Association indicated that diet and inactivity will soon surpass tobacco as the leading cause of death). If students are given healthy choices along with unhealthy choices, can we expect them to make the healthy choices? Many advocates feel that education can only go so far in an environment full of temptation. There are some voluntary guidelines put into place by school food service associations for the a la carte (competitive) foods that are supposed to lead to students to make healthier choices. While these guidelines may get rid of some of the worst offenders, they are primarily based on processed foods, and still allow for the possibility of deep-fried potato chips at 6 or 7 grams of fat per serving, yet don't allow for nuts/seeds, which would be high fat, or dried fruits (non-sulfured, no added sugar), which would be high sugar, but quite healthy in single servings. We should see these efforts as a step in the right direction, but hopefully not the end product. Foodservice directors and administrators alike often insist that students will not eat the healthy food, which is why the unhealthy food must be offered. Yet schools that have made big changes are finding out that students do go for the healthy foods. This has been proven in schools and communities as diverse as the Promise

Academy in Harlem, New York, to the private Ross School, in East Hampton, New York. It's possible that the biggest obstacle to change may be the resistant adults.

### **Self Op versus Contract Management**

Most schools operate their own food service programs, called "Self Op." Other schools rely on school food service management companies, referred to as "contract management." Interestingly, while federal law states that school food service must be operated as a non-profit entity, the contract management companies are for profit. Apparently, it is okay for someone to profit from our children via federal tax dollars (and self-pay), as long as it is not the school district itself.

Additionally, about half of the food service programs (both self op and contract management) must raise money for the district as well. For example, one contract management company has to raise \$125,000 for the school district, which the district described as "taxpayer relief." Another way to think about it is 416,000 \$.60 bags of potato chips or ice creams (with \$.30 profit per item), or a bag of potato chips or an ice cream every other day for every student in the district.

### **Competitive Foods: A la carte, vending, school stores, fundraising**

The sale of competitive foods, which are any foods available other than the school meals (inside the cafeteria and out), reduces participation in the school meal program. It's an odd paradox then that food service directors feel that they must sell unhealthy a la carte items (potato chips, cookies, ice cream...) to make ends meet. The School Nutrition Association states that this is because vending machines started popping up in schools to fund athletics and other activities (and these were not run by the cafeteria), which resulted in reduced income to the school meal programs. Food service directors were then in a bind and began offering the kinds of foods sold in vending machines to make up for lost meal sales, and could usually offer them at a lower price due to greater buying power. According to Ann Cooper, "It didn't matter what was on the school lunch menu because kids could get junk food at every turn." And they did. Now removing these "competitive foods" from the cafeteria is a financial risk, since students can still buy them outside of the cafeteria, in vending machines, school stores, or through fundraising activities. Until the whole school food environment is cleaned up, we can't expect the food service directors to remove the unhealthy foods from the cafeteria, and it wouldn't make any difference either, if students could still buy those foods just outside the cafeteria doors.

### **Competitive Beverages**

Just days after Connecticut passed a law to ban regular and diet soda and electrolyte replacement beverages such as Gatorade, the top beverage distributors made an eleventh hour announcement of a non-binding agreement to eliminate sugar containing sodas, while still keeping their brand in the school in the form of diet sodas, ice teas, and electrolyte replacement "sports" drinks. To the public who didn't know better, it looked like they were actually making concessions, but many school wellness policies under development at the time included the elimination of sodas and sports drinks from schools anyway. So why did the soda industry make the announcement? They want to look like

they are part of the obesity solution, yet still have an influence on the policies that were under development at the time of the announcement (perhaps keeping more of their products in the schools than the schools might have otherwise planned on.) The agreement was made in hopes that it would help them to avoid further state legislation and litigation. The plan was mostly a public relations ploy – the “agreement” is completely voluntary, not scheduled to be in place until the 2008-2009 school year (with 75% of schools participating), and is based on schools making the request, rather than the distributors insisting on it. Sadly, for the schools that go along with the soda industry agreement, students will be drinking far more diet sodas containing artificial sweeteners, sports drinks loaded with almost as much sugar as soda as well as unnecessary electrolytes, ice teas with caffeine, and other beverages that have no nutritional value, than they might otherwise would have been.

### **Undermining Parental Control**

One message that has come from some in the school food service community is that what a child eats/or if a child is overweight it is the parents responsibility. The school food environment undermines parents and teachers efforts because, regardless of what the children are taught, the environment does not reflect good nutrition. The efforts of parents who make only healthy choices for their children are undermined; their children are still surrounded by others who are eating poorly, and the temptation of unhealthy food is there. The message they get is that healthy eating is not the norm, and that they do not fit in with their classmates. On the other hand, when a child is not eating healthfully at home, it is all the more reason that the school should practice what it teaches and serve as a role model for healthy eating – these children need it more than anyone, regardless of whose responsibility it is.

Some schools are offering pre-paid cards that offer the option of only allowing the purchase of the school meal, but no a la carte items. Others offer systems where parents can track what their children do purchase, after the fact. If all foods available were healthy, then students could choose between healthy items, and they wouldn't need tracking systems.

The school food environment is aided by the advertising industry which spends \$15 billion per year on marketing directed at 8 – 13 year olds. There are even companies who specialize at getting industry messages into curriculums and schools in other ways, according to Eric Schlosser in Fast Food Nation.

### **Vegetarian and vegan foods in schools**

Vegetarian and vegan options are not just for vegetarian and vegan students. The fact is that our kids don't need more cheese, chicken, or beef to be healthy, they need less. They need less animal products, less processed foods, and more whole plant foods. We have to be careful with vegetarian options, because they are often cheese based, and therefore potentially just as bad, if not worse, than a meat based option. Cheese is high fat, and loaded with saturated fat, and often dripping with grease, according to many school children. Even reduced-fat cheese is really high fat! For example, USDA Commodity reduced fat cheddar cheese is 58% fat! Part skim mozzarella is 55% fat (compared to

whole milk mozzarella which is 65% fat), and reduced fat string cheese is 50% fat. One school's macaroni and cheese contains 3 ½ tablespoons of fat for a one cup serving. Clearly, even the reduced fat cheeses are still very high fat foods, and many of our children's school meals are cheese based. Vegan (plant-based) options are a much healthier choice for all students, and should be offered as a healthy option. They help to meet the School Meal Initiative requirements to reduce cholesterol (cholesterol is only found in foods of animal origin) and increase dietary fiber (fiber is only found in plant foods.)

The School Nutrition Association (SNA) conducts surveys of food service directors around the country. For the first time they asked if the school offered vegetarian and vegan options. 25% of elementary, 30% of middle schools, and 36% of high schools offer daily vegetarian meals (includes eggs and dairy.) 5% of elementary, 6% of middle, and 10% of high schools offer vegan options (defined as no meat, dairy or animal products.) What is not known is how many schools might have included peanut butter and jelly or salads as vegetarian or vegan options, since they are offered in so many schools. It would be interesting to know how many schools are offering vegetarian/vegan options other than PB&J/salad, and to find out what they are serving. That the SNA asked the question on its' survey indicates that this is a trend to be watched, and that there is growing interest in such choices.

Certainly, a trend has begun. Four states, including Hawaii, California, New York, and Florida have passed legislative resolutions (these are recommendations, not laws) that encourage vegetarian and vegan entrees, among other recommendations for healthier school foods.

New York City schools hired a professional chef, Jorge Collazo, and one of their initiatives includes enhanced nutrition standards, to exceed USDA standards with an emphasis on more plant-based proteins, among other changes. In addition, the SchoolFood Plus initiative in New York City, has as a main objective "Introducing newly developed plant-based recipes, in cafeterias city-wide, that utilize foods grown by New York farmers and procured by the NYC public school system." SchoolFood Plus is a partnership of New York City Department of Education; Office of SchoolFood; New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets; Teachers' College, Columbia University and FoodChange, and was initially funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2004. Its goal is to improve the eating habits, health and academic performance of New York City public schoolchildren while strengthening the New York State agricultural economy through the procurement of local, regional produce.

Grady High School in Atlanta has a separate vegetarian lunch line, with options like veggie burgers, egg rolls, pasta salad, vegetarian pizza and sloppy Joes made from tofu. The vegetarian service was originally designed for 30 students in a vegetarian club, and now up to one-quarter of the 1,200 students get on the vegetarian line each day. Tom Callahan, the senior vice president of Sodexo, a food service management company which provides Grady's food service, noted that Eugene, OR, and other cities in the

Pacific Northwest are beginning to look at Atlanta's example, even though they already have a very significant selection of vegetarian options. These options include hummus in whole wheat pita, cyclone salads – a “portable no utensils” salad wrap that is available in several different versions, vegetarian tacos, spinach calzone, and roasted vegetable burrito. Sodexo sees the Pacific Northwest as a very progressive area, setting the trends for the county. According to Bonnie Gordon, spokesperson for Sodexo, “we are seeing a definite trend in K-12 school districts, with the demand for vegetarian/vegan items spreading like wildfire.”

Appleton Central Schools in Appleton, Wisconsin made drastic changes to food available in their public schools. But first they started by making those changes in their alternative high school. By eliminating all junk foods and artificial ingredients, offering plenty of fresh whole foods, and a plant-based option each day, they saw dramatic improvements in attendance, grades and behavior. They produced a DVD with testimony of school administrators and teachers that explains what a difference the changes to school food have made for the whole school environment.

The Ross School, a private school in East Hampton, New York, set the gold standard in healthful eating, with vegetarian entrée options daily, often vegan, along with numerous whole grain and vegetable side dishes, made from as much from regional, organic, seasonal, and sustainable foods as possible. This was accomplished after hiring Ann Cooper, a certified executive chef, and asking her to create what she imagined would be the ideal school food environment. This resulted in putting up 4 tons of local food (much of it organic and all of it local) each year to use throughout the winter, unlimited fruit for each child throughout the school day, required work on a local farm or in the school garden for students, and a graduation requirement to plan and prepare a full meal. The Ross School has won many awards for its program, but Chef Ann, while proud of her work, was tired of hearing that it could only be done in a private school. She is now the Food Service Director of the Berkeley Unified School District in California. She has only been there since the fall of 2005, and yet already all schools (including elementary) have very successful salad bars, and she has made a requirement that all non-commodity meat and dairy products, while not organic, must be from hormone and antibiotic-free animals. It is a given that schools need more money to do the right thing for children, but Chef Ann has also proven that you can do quite a bit even on a ridiculously low budget. Look for Chef Ann's soon to be released book: *Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children*, co-written with Lisa Holmes, for more information.

The Promise Academy, in Harlem, New York, provides breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner for the students that are all natural, containing no preservatives or processed foods. Chef Andrew Benson has confirmed that they are working to incorporate tofu dishes, and that they feed the students scrambled tofu for breakfast, but that many of them think it is scrambled eggs. They have as a goal to get children to try many foods that they would not normally have the chance to try, so that they are exposed to a huge variety of foods. The school bans sugary snacks, holds a farmers market once a month, and teaches parents and children how to cook. The children eat at round tables with tablecloths.

The Rockland Country Day School, a private school, hired Main Essentials, a vegan restaurant, to handle its food service. While they offer turkey hotdogs daily, and an entrée

that can contain either tofu or chicken, approximately 60% of the students are choosing the vegan option, and non-vegetarian students describe the offerings as “infinitely better” than the previous year before the change.

The Bloomfield Central School District, in upstate New York, offers a farmers market line complete with locally grown vegetables and fruits, whole grain and bean salads, and two five-gallon pots of soup each day, at least one of which is vegan. Food Service Director Todd Fowler can hardly keep the farmers market line stocked, and the soups always disappear by the end of the lunch periods.

### **Farm to School Programs and School Gardens**

Farm to school programs are gaining in popularity all over the country. They connect schools with local farms with the objective of serving healthy meals, improving student nutrition, providing health and nutrition education opportunities that will last a lifetime, and at the same time supporting small local farmers. The programs allow schools to buy directly from farms, for children to experience fresh and delicious produce, and in some cases for children to visit those farms.

Alice Waters, owner of the Chez Panisse Restaurant and the Chez Panisse Foundation has done much to promote the idea of growing food in a school garden to demonstrate the transformative power of growing, cooking, and sharing food. Growing food, harvesting it, and then preparing it (or eating it straight out of the garden), provides children with an invaluable, hands on learning experience that gives them an appreciation of where food comes from, how it grows, and dramatically increases the chance that they will be willing to eat it. Whether on the ground, a rooftop, or even in sprouting jars, growing food and visiting farms is something that should be a part of all children’s education. Learn more about it at [www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org), [www.edibleschoolyard.org](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org), and [www.kidsgardening.com](http://www.kidsgardening.com).

### **USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program – More Please!**

This is a USDA program which is currently providing \$15 million to 375 schools in fourteen states and three Indian Tribal Organizations to encourage increased consumption of fresh (and dried) fruits and vegetables. Schools participating in the program will be able to purchase locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, which will be provided free to the children as snacks. They may not be served during meal time. The pilot program, which began in 2002, showed that fresh fruits and vegetables can be provided to children for \$94/year per student, and that students will eat fresh fruits and vegetables when given the opportunity. Some schools reported lower sales of candy and other less nutritious foods, increased attention in class, fewer visits to the school nurse, reduced number of unhealthy snacks brought from home. They also felt that it increased student’s desire for a variety of fruits and vegetables, including less familiar items such as kiwis and pears, that it helped children who would otherwise be hungry get more food. In 2004, the Child Nutrition and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act made the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program permanent. The participating states include: Washington, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Utah, Wisconsin, New Mexico, Texas, Connecticut and Idaho.

### **Department of Defense (DOD) - Protecting Our Children**

The USDA was exploring ways to provide more fresh fruits and vegetables to children. The Department of Defense, Defense Supply Center Philadelphia (DSCP) operates a huge nationwide purchasing and distribution program of high quality American grown fresh fruits and vegetables. So in 1995 they partnered to begin a pilot project to supply fresh fruits and vegetables directly to schools while also making deliveries to military and other sites. The program allows schools to use part of their commodity entitlement to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables.

The program is open to all states, and is currently operating in 43 states, the District of Columbia, as well as several US territories and is funded at \$50 million. Schools are also allowed to use other funds (federal and state reimbursements) to purchase additional produce from the DOD, and in 2005 spent an additional \$20 million. The DOD works to procure as much produce as possible regionally. States have the ability to limit the types of produce their schools may order.

### **Federally Mandated Local Wellness Policies**

Changes are on the horizon, and some schools already are doing better than what was describe in “Who’s to Blame?” The federal Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, requires that schools create and adopt *Local Wellness Policies* for implementation at the beginning of the 2006/2007 school year. The policy must:

1. Create goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school based activities that are designed to promote student wellness.
2. Include nutrition guidelines for all foods available during the school day with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity.
3. Provide an assurance that guidelines for reimbursable school meals shall not be less restrictive than USDA requirements.
4. Establish a plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy, including designation of one or more persons at each school, charged with responsibility for ensuring that the school meets the local wellness policy.
5. Include parents, students, representatives of the school board, school administrators, food service authority, and the public in the development of the school wellness policy.

In many cases, schools around the country scrambled to put these policies together. Once they are written, they are not a finished product. The policies should be seen as dynamic, and continually updated to make improvements. How effective they are will depend on the commitment of the people who put the policies together and whether or not the policies are enforced. Model wellness policies are available at

[www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org) and [www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org](http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org).

### **Education and the Food Environment**

Clearly, education goes hand in hand with environmental change. No matter how much we educate students, if we don’t offer healthy foods, we can’t expect them to choose them. Even if we do educate them, it doesn’t mean that they will make the right choices in an atmosphere of temptation. Children are very in the moment, into instant gratification, and can not comprehend their own mortality – yet it is being suggested that

with education, they might choose a baked sweet potato over French fries. If there is any hope, it may depend on teaching children about the food industry and how they are being targeted by it. This approach works with tobacco, which is why many of the youth led anti-tobacco commercials are about outing the industry.

Chew on This, by Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, and Charles Wilson, is a children's version of *Fast Food Nation*, appropriate for kids ages 8 – 13. It's just out, and a must read – and may help children to understand how they are being hoodwinked. It explains how market research firms study kids to inform their advertising choices. It teaches children about where our food really comes from (the kind we should be eating less of) and gives them plenty of activities and ideas about what they can do to effect change.

Food is Elementary ([www.foodstudiesinstitute.org](http://www.foodstudiesinstitute.org)) is a wonderful multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary, food based curriculum which teaches children about food and other information from different cultures. Antonia Demas, author of *Food is Elementary*, showed that if children can see, feel, smell, touch, prepare, and experience different foods, they will try them if offered in a cafeteria environment and even request them at home. Children cook the food in the classroom, and the hands on experiences turn them on to foods they wouldn't otherwise have tried. *Food is Elementary* won a USDA award for the most creative implementation of the US Dietary Guidelines.

SchoolFood Plus ([www.foodchange.org](http://www.foodchange.org)) is a multi-dimensional program described in the article above, available in selected schools in New York City. Its Cookshop Program is similar to *Food is Elementary*, but it's focus is on locally grown foods and teaches children how to cook using 10 different fruits and vegetables grown in New York State, while teaching the children about the farmers who grew the food, how it grew and more. Its EATWISE program (Educating and Aware Teens Who Inspire Smart Eating) engages teens in hands on learning about food and food systems, including smoothie sales, peer nutrition education, with the goal of creating an action-oriented youth movement focused on choosing healthier foods, raising awareness about food issues in their communities, and improving access to healthier food.

New York Coalition for Healthy School Lunches (NYCHSL) ([www.healthylunches.org](http://www.healthylunches.org)) (NYCHSL) is a statewide nonprofit that works to improve the health and well-being of New York's students by advocating for healthy plant-based foods, comprehensive nutrition policy, and education to create food- and health-literate students. They offer activity sheets and instructions for activities that teach children about various nutrition issues, such as the fat and sugar content of favorite foods. In addition they offer a music CD by Jay Mankita with songs about healthy foods for elementary children, and activities/lessons to go along with each song. The CD will be available in the fall of 2006. Center for Science in the Public Interest [www.smartmouth.org](http://www.smartmouth.org) has a great children's computer game that teaches kids about the food industry.

### **The Other Environment**

It is now rare that schools use reusable plates, utensils, and trays. Every day, an enormous amount of garbage is produced in our nation's schools. What hurts our environment eventually hurts human health. All things are connected. All the while children are taught about reducing, reusing, and recycling, every day they are throwing away a lot of garbage, creating yet another disconnect.

## Steps to change

It's really important that if you want to create change in your cafeteria, you have to work with, not against, the food service director. Recognize the difficult circumstances they work under and see if you can problem solve together as a team. Remember, too that the cafeteria is just one part of the whole school food environment, and that changes must be made wherever food is available in schools, so that when students go to school, they get a consistent message wherever they are in the building.

There is a growing movement of parents, students, and food service personnel who are working to establish farm to school programs, more homemade foods, more plant-based foods, and less junk foods. When a critical mass of people insists on meaningful change, it will happen. Get involved – every voice is needed.

1. Join your local wellness committees. Students, parents, school administrators and board members, food service personnel, and members of the public are expected to be involved, according to federal mandate. Contact your superintendent or food service director to find out how to get on the committee.
2. Join your local Parent Teacher Association. PTA's offer the opportunity to write resolutions that are voted on at the state level at PTA annual conferences. This is a way to help establish policy. If passed, they become official policy and the basis for action. In addition, resolutions can be passed at the local level as well. For example, one PTA decided to only serve healthy foods at their meetings, and not to sell unhealthy foods as a fundraiser.
3. Get kitchens back in schools. Many schools no longer have functioning kitchens where food can actually be prepared. This results in heat and serve processed foods that are usually high in cholesterol, fat, added sugars, and sodium.
4. Hire/train food service staff who know how to cook, pay them a fair wage and give them health benefits. Marion Nestle, author of "Food Politics" and chair of New York University's Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health says, "hire people who really care...if you don't have people who really care in place it's just not going to happen no matter what you do. Paying people fairly and giving them benefits can go a long way toward having employees that take their work more seriously."
5. Spend more money on foods. Currently, the average food cost for breakfast and lunches in the public schools is in the \$1.40 range. The Ross School provides breakfast and lunch, including seconds, plus unlimited fruit which is available all day for just \$3.16 per day per child for food costs, with 17 employees for 460 children. The Promise Academy spends \$5.87 a day for breakfast, lunch, and a snack. We are facing a national crisis and we need to invest in our children now. Contact your senators and congresspersons to let them know how you feel about this.
6. Establish Farm to School Programs. These programs promote local agriculture and are great for the kids. Many students don't really understand where their food comes from.
7. Educate the kids. Research showed that what most turned children off to the tobacco industry was learning how they were being targeted by the industry. Kids do not like to feel that they are being "hoodwinked". This tactic, applied to the junk and fast food

industries, and the meat and dairy industries, has already shown promise in many classrooms.

8. Support the Harkin School Lunch Protection Act. (see sidebar)

9. Work to increase the required two servings of fruits/vegetables to three. Contact your senators and congresspersons to discuss this.

### **Conclusion**

While some schools have made comprehensive changes quickly, eliminating all junk foods, preparing whole foods meals, and providing extensive nutrition education, most schools will need to make these changes over time to gain acceptance from students and staff. The most effective programs will be those with committed school leadership that makes wellness a primary part of the school experience, serving health supporting whole foods and providing education to the whole school community: students, staff, parents, and other members of the public. Schools can play a key role in setting a good example for children to follow, both with the information they teach and the foods that they serve.

Our children's bodies and minds are literally built from the food and beverages that they take in. If we don't invest in our children now, they will grow up not achieving their full potential, and many of them will end up disabled from the ravages of diabetes, or die before their time from cancer or heart disease, or unhappy about their excessive weight. Health supporting foods result in good health, better academic performance, less disciplinary problems, and better moods. When schools choose to get rid of junk foods, and make all choices healthy ones, along with a commitment to food and nutrition education, they will see big changes in the problems that plague many schools – poor academic performance and disciplinary problems, and high rates of absenteeism. It is up to us now to reach out to our schools, and make a difference. We are on the threshold of incredible change - be a part of it.

### **Sidebar: Take Action on the School Lunch Protection Act**

Contact your Senators and Congresspersons and let them know how you feel! This is a non-partisan bill, supported by the National Parent Teacher Association, School Nutrition Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, and 85 members of the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. It would update nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools. Currently, federal law defines *Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value (FMNV)* as: soda water, water ices, chewing gum, hard candies, jellies and gum candies, marshmallow candies, fondant, licorice, spun candy and candy coated popcorn. FMNV will become a more meaningful term, and according to Senator Harkin, include foods such as donuts, cookies, candy bars, and ice cream – clearly, foods that children do not need to be eating in school. The bill would close the loophole that allows the USDA to set the standards for foods sold in the cafeteria, but not outside of it. This is huge, and will set an even playing stage. According to Senator Harkin, this loophole sabotages the \$9 billion spent per year on breakfasts and lunches, by the pervasive sale of junk foods elsewhere on the school campus.

### **Sidebar: Getting kids to like oatmeal**

The South Country Central School District on Long Island, in New York, was having a problem getting young children to eat oatmeal. The nutrition committee got involved, and suggested some changes to the oatmeal. The new oatmeal had chopped apples, cinnamon and pure maple syrup (only 1 teaspoon per serving) and a new name – apple pie oatmeal. We kicked it off with two dozen balloons, flashing pins for the cafeteria workers to wear, and a volunteer at the beginning of the lunch line telling the children about the new apple pie oatmeal. We served it along side plain oatmeal so the children could compare it. The kids got a fancy pencil for trying both and telling the nutrition committee volunteers which one they liked most (and they could also tell us that they didn't like it). Out of 50 students, 4 liked the plain better, and the rest really liked the apple pie oatmeal. The following week we tried it again, this time comparing peach pie oatmeal with apple pie oatmeal. The mylar balloons were still flying from the week before, and this week we gave out crazy straws as a reward for trying the both types and giving us their opinion. We found that it was 50/50 for apple versus peach, and now the school will alternate the flavors each week. The total cost of the promotion was \$56, well worth it to get 50 children to try a healthy breakfast and to find out that they like it.

### **Nutritious Foods – Not What We're Eating!**

According to USDA statistics, in the US we consume 51% of our calories from refined and processed foods, 42% from foods of animal origin, 2% of foods from white potato products (and this includes French fries and potato chips), and sadly, only 5% come from whole plant food sources – the very foods we know that support good health and prevent the major killers of Americans: Heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

The statistics are truly scary: 50% of children between the ages of 2 – 15 have fatty streaks in their arteries, literally the beginning stages of heart disease. 30 – 40% of all US children, and 40 – 53% of African American and Hispanic children born in the year 2000 will develop type 2 diabetes. This means that 1/3 of all Americans have the potential now to end up blind, with amputated limbs, or with an even higher risk of heart disease. Cancer rates are expected to increase by 50% by 2020, with most cancers being related to diet. In addition, poor diet results in more illness such as colds or flu, asthma and allergies. Finally, 66% of American adults are overweight and half of those are obese. Our children are following quickly in our footsteps, with 17% overweight according to national statistics. While many children are overfed, in most cases they are malnourished, eating a high calorie, low-nutrient diet – with less than 2% of children eating in line with the less than perfect pyramid. The results are not only poor health, but significant effects on mood, behavior, and even mental health. In school, the effects are significant, impacting attendance, grades, and behavior.

The food component most associated with heart disease, cancer and diabetes, is saturated fat. Saturated fat is found primarily in foods of animal origin, but also in junk foods. In addition, cholesterol is found only in foods of animal origin. As you can see from the following pie chart, it's no surprise that we are suffering so much.

If we take a look at children's menus in restaurants, kids favorite foods at home, and yes, even the school food environment (not just meals), we find that the food consists

primarily of refined and processed foods, animal products, and white potato products (about half of which are in the form of French fries and potato chips.)

1 Munoz KA, Krebs-Smith S, Ballard-Barbash R, Cleveland LE. "Food Intakes of U.S. Children and Adolescents Compared With Recommendations," *Pediatr.* 1997; 100: 323-329. Errata: *Pediatr.* 101 (5):952-953.

2. Agriculture Fact Book, 1998, U.S. Department of Agriculture

3. A Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals, Team Nutrition USDA, at <http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/Recipes/menuplan/menuplan.html>

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