

# How to Create a Healthier School Food Culture



## What is a healthy school food culture?

Obesity and undernourishment in America have reached epidemic proportions. Children spend 900-1,000 hours in school every year. Creating a healthy school food culture is a critical step towards reversing this national health crisis facing our children. A healthy school food culture goes way beyond the cafeteria. Here's what it looks like:

- School policies and practices consistently make the healthy choice the easy and desirable

one, including outside the school day and during special events.

- School staff and adult volunteers role model healthy eating habits.
- Students and families receive consistent messages about healthy eating across all aspects of the school, whether it's in the classroom, the front office, the cafeteria, during snack time, for a reward, at a celebration, sporting or family event or in relation to a fundraiser.

## Benefits of a Healthy School Food Culture<sup>1</sup>

- **Supports classroom lessons.** The policies and practices in a healthy food culture reflect curriculum standards for health and nutrition rather than conflict with them.
- **Encourages consumption of healthy foods.** In a healthy school, students regularly consume healthy options in place of nutritionally-empty snacks such as cookies, chips and candy.
- **Contributes to good health.** Children who practice healthy eating habits are less likely to suffer from conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cavities.
- **Promotes the right messages.** A healthy food culture publicly demonstrates a school's commitment to promoting healthy behaviors among its students, families and staff, sending the message that health is a top priority.
- **Creates excitement about nutrition.** Children are excited about new and different things. When nutritious foods are presented in a fun and engaging way, students are eager to get involved.
- **Healthy kids learn better.** Research clearly shows that good nutrition is linked to better behavior and academic performance.<sup>2</sup>

## Unhealthy Food at School Contributes to the Childhood Obesity Epidemic

In a study among 3,088 eighth-graders, students' body mass indexes (BMIs) increased by 10% for every additional food practice (such as food being used as rewards or for fundraising) permitted in their school, suggesting that regular exposure to these common practices increases risk for weight gain among students.<sup>3</sup>

## The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) supports the creation of a healthier school food culture. In addition to creating stricter rules for the nutritional quality of meals served through school lunch and breakfast programs, the HHFKA authorizes the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to set national nutritional standards for all foods sold on campus throughout the school day including vending machines, a la carte lines in the cafeteria, school stores and fundraisers. These foods are called "competitive foods" because they compete with the reimbursable meals offered for sale through national school lunch and breakfast programs.

The HHFKA also strengthens local school wellness policies, which must include goals for nutrition education and promotion, along with stronger provisions for community involvement in the policy development, implementation and review process. Advocates seeking to create a healthier school food culture can use the HHFKA as a platform to promote healthy school practices.

## Is Your School Ready to Take the Challenge?

The HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSCC) is a voluntary certification initiative established in 2004 to recognize schools participating in the National School Lunch Program that have created healthier school environments through promotion of nutrition and physical activity. The HUSCC is a great way to motivate your community to create a healthier school food culture. Schools can receive monetary incentive awards by participating in the program. To receive a HUSCC award, a school must:

- Support the local wellness policy efforts of its district.

- Provide meals that meet requirements related to the type, frequency and portion sizes of the foods served.
- Meet nutrition standards for all competitive foods sold on campus.
- Address criteria related to nutrition education, health promotion, physical activity and the overall school food culture.

## Best Practices for Healthy Foods in Schools

- Make healthy options standard whenever foods are sold or shared — parties, fundraisers, school events, celebrations, concessions — in and out of the cafeteria and the classroom.
- Choose fresh fruits and vegetables, water, whole grains and low fat/fat-free dairy products as the primary options for students.
- Limit or eliminate unhealthy choices that interfere with nutrition education, send conflicting messages about what we value and make it harder for kids to internalize healthy habits.
- Shift the focus from food — host events which promote physical activity, music, art and games.
- Provide students with non-food rewards for good behavior and performance to promote the development of lifelong healthy eating patterns.
- Use school food as an opportunity for nutrition education with school gardens, taste tests, healthy snack time, healthy vending, concessions and school stores.
- Write goals into wellness policies and school improvement plans to build support, track progress and ensure that best practices will continue.

## Making a Difference

Creating a healthier school food culture was a priority for the wellness committee at Norwich Elementary in Hilliard, Ohio. Using *Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge* as a framework for their healthy school efforts, the committee led tastings, challenges and other activities around fruits and vegetables, dairy and whole grains.



During the school's Winter Fair fundraiser, appreciative parents were treated to yogurt parfaits with whole grain toppings instead of the usual cotton candy and snow cones. More whole grains were added to the cafeteria menu in March for School Nutrition Month. "We used our school as a pilot to try out some whole grains...Lunch participation increased dramatically. Other schools heard about it and now whole grains are in the whole district. It was really a huge success."

~ Mary Chace,  
Norwich Wellness Committee

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from "Healthy Celebrations," Connecticut State Department of Education, May 2005 and "Alternatives to Food Rewards," Connecticut State Department of Education, May 2005 (Revised November 2011).

<sup>2</sup> AFHK, "The Learning Connection: The Value of Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity in our Schools."

<sup>3</sup> Kubik M., Lytle L, Story M. "Schoolwide Food Practices Are Associated with Body Mass Index in Middle School Students." Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine 2005, vol. 159, pp. 1111-1114.

## 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.



Learn • Act • Transform

## RESOURCES

- 1 For tips on nutrition education, healthy snacks, fundraising, celebrations, rewards and competitive foods, visit: <http://www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/ParentToolkit>
- 2 To learn more about the link between nutrition, physical activity and student performance: "The Learning Connection - What You Need to Know to Ensure Your Kids are Healthy and Ready to Learn," AFHK: <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/thelearningconnection>
- 3 To learn more about the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010: [http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/legislation/cnr\\_2010.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/legislation/cnr_2010.htm)
- 4 To learn more about the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSC): <http://teammnutrition.usda.gov/healthierus/index.html>
- 5 To download an AFHK presentation to make the case for creating a healthier school food and physical activity culture: <http://www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/ShareHealthyFoods>