Get the Facts About Your School Lunch Program

What about the obesity crisis among America’s children?

- Addressing the childhood obesity crisis will take a community-wide effort - with a significant focus on increasing children’s physical activity, reducing screen time, as well as promoting healthy diets at home and throughout the school day.

- Students eat about 17% of their meals each year in schools – with the remainder eaten at home or in restaurants.

- Studies have shown:
  - Students who eat school meals provided through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs are more likely to be a healthy weight (Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, August 2003).
  - A 2007 study, published in the American Journal of Public Health, found that children tend to gain more weight during the summer time than when they are in school. The study stated that “it appears that they [schools] are healthier than most children’s non-school environments.”
  - National School Lunch Program participants are more likely than non-participants to consume vegetables, milk and milk products, and meat and other protein-rich foods, both at lunch and over 24 hours. They also consume less soda and/or fruit drinks. (USDA)

Are school meals nutritious?

- School meals provide students their choice of milk, fruits and vegetables, grains and proteins, and help teach children all the components of a well-balanced meal.

- School meals are well-balanced, healthy meals that are required to meet science-based, federal nutrition standards.
  - No more than 30% of calories can come from fat, less than 10% from saturated fat
  - Meals must provide 1/3 of Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, vitamins A and C, iron and calcium
  - School meals are served in age-appropriate portion sizes

- Every school lunch includes five great choices that add up to a great value:
  - Milk – Fat free or 1% - flavored or regular
  - Vegetables – From jicama slaw to fresh carrot sticks
  - Fruit – Everything from kiwi to locally grown apples; often fresh
  - Grains – More whole grain items like rolls or sandwich bread
  - Meat or Meat Alternative – White chicken meat, bean chili, lean beef

- School meals offer a great value and a huge convenience for busy parents. Parents can rest assured that there’s no super-sizing in school cafeterias because federal regulations require schools to serve age-appropriate portions.
• Children need protein and limited amounts of fat to support growth and development. School meal programs provide nutrient-dense foods such as low-fat dairy products, lean meats and whole grains served in age-appropriate portions.

• Schools are constantly working to further improve the nutrition, taste and variety of meals.

• Federal nutrition standards for school meals are currently being updated. In January 2011, the US Department of Agriculture released proposed nutrition standards including new calorie and sodium limits, larger fruit and vegetable serving sizes and requirements to expand the variety of vegetable served in schools each week. The standards will be finalized in 2012. However, with the new standards expected to increase the cost of school lunches by 15 cents per meal and the cost of breakfast by 51 cents per meal, schools will require additional support to cover increased food, equipment and labor expenses.

Are school meals safe?

• School nutrition professionals care for the children they serve, and through strict food safety procedures and staff training, school nutrition professionals maintain a superior safety record while providing nutritious meals to millions of children each day. Some of the steps schools take to ensure their meals are safe include:
  o Taking at least two internal temperatures from each batch of food being cooked
  o Maintaining records of cooking, cooling, and reheating temperatures in the food preparation process – the basis for periodic reviews of the overall food safety program
  o Pre-chilling all salad ingredients to help maintain cold food temperatures
  o Preheating transfer carts before food is transported

Why should I encourage my children to eat school meals?

• Providing students their choice of milk, fruits and vegetables, grains and proteins, school meals are a great value and a huge convenience for busy parents. School cafeterias offer students a variety of healthy choices and help children learn how to assemble a well-balanced meal. Parents can rest assured that there’s no supersizing in school cafeterias because federal regulations require schools to serve age-appropriate portions.

Don’t school meals contain processed foods?

• What have become known as “processed foods” are increasingly being prepared with healthier ingredients, as well as less, fat, sodium and sugar.
  o Pizzas are increasingly made with whole grain crusts, low-sodium sauce and reduced fat cheese.
  o Chicken nuggets regularly use whole grain breading and are baked rather than fried.
  o French fries are without trans fat and baked instead of fried – and many schools are now serving baked sweet potato fries.
Why are schools serving flavored milk?

- School nutrition programs offer fat free or low-fat milk (flavored or regular without high fructose corn syrup) with each meal. School meals offer flavored milk as an option because experts agree that to ensure intake of calcium, vitamin D, protein and other nutrients important for growth and development, it is better for children and adolescents to drink flavored milk than to avoid milk altogether.

- A recent Institute of Medicine report on calcium and vitamin D intake emphasized the importance of both nutrients for bone health and found that school-aged girls, from ages 9 to 18, often do not consume the recommended amount of calcium.

- Leading health and nutrition organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Heart Association, American Dietetic Association, the National Medical Association, and School Nutrition Association, have all expressed their support for low-fat and fat-free milk in schools, including flavored milk.
  - The groups cited studies demonstrating that children who drink flavored milk meet more of their nutrient needs; do not consume more added sugar, fat or calories; and are not heavier than non-milk drinkers.

- The Institute of Medicine, in their recommended nutrition standards for school meals (“School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children”), also supported keeping fat-free flavored milk in schools because of the critical nutrients that flavored milk provides.

- For more information, visit www.nationaldairycouncil.org/childnutrition/Pages/HealthEducationKit.aspx

- A study recently presented at the American Dietetic Association’s Food and Nutrition Conference and Expo found that when flavored milk was removed from a school district in Connecticut, milk consumption dropped by as much as 67%.

How are school nutrition programs working to make healthy meals kid friendly?

- Children can be notoriously picky eaters, but school nutrition directors are always working to find new healthy recipes that children are willing to eat. Many conduct student taste tests and involve students in menu planning.

- Schools and food service industry are making student favorites more healthy, such as serving pizza on whole grain bread with low-sodium sauce and low-fat cheese. Students often don’t even notice the difference. School nutrition programs also work to incorporate culturally appropriate foods into their menus to meet the tastes of their diverse student populations.

Why aren’t schools serving more organic foods?

- There is no conclusive scientific evidence that organic food is superior with regard to food safety or nutrition. Conventional and organic foods contain the same vitamins and nutrients. Even the USDA, which certifies organic food, does not claim that these products are safer or more nutritious than conventionally grown foods.
• By law, food served through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs must be grown in the USA, subject to USDA inspections and standards.

• Organic food is much more expensive then conventionally farmed foods, creating a significant barrier for financially strained school meal programs.

• Schools are focused on increasing availability and variety of fruits and vegetables served, whether conventionally farmed or organically farmed.

Why are school nutrition programs allowing the use of high fructose corn syrup in some of the products they serve?

• The American Medical Association (AMA) recently concluded that high fructose corn syrup “does not appear to contribute more to obesity than other caloric sweeteners.”

• The American Dietetic Association says that “high fructose corn syrup is nutritionally equivalent to sucrose. Both sweeteners contain the same number of calories (4 per gram) and consist of about equal parts of fructose and glucose. Once absorbed into the blood stream, the two sweeteners are indistinguishable.”

How many schools participate in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs?

• The National School Lunch Program operates in nearly 95% of America’s schools, providing lunches to more than 31 million children daily with 5 billion lunches served annually. Approximately 85% of schools participate in the National School Breakfast Program (NSBP), which serves 10.6 million children daily or 1.8 billion breakfasts a year.

Do all students have access to the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs?

• All children at participating schools may purchase meals meeting federal nutrition standards, through the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, but families with incomes at or below 185% of the poverty level are eligible for free or reduced price meals. Families receive applications for the free and reduced price program from their school nutrition department at the start of the school year.

How can parents get involved in school meal programs?

• Getting involved in school meals programs is easy. Start with these easy steps:
  o Review cafeteria menus with your child and be encouraging about trying new menu items. Try new foods – especially fruits and vegetables – at home and your child may be more willing to try these foods at school.
  o Visit the school cafeteria to make your own observations and have lunch. Check with the principal first to make sure that is allowed!
  o Introduce yourself to the school nutrition staff at your child’s school. They can provide you with administration contact information.

• The School Nutrition Association is a national, nonprofit professional organization representing more than 53,000 members who provide high-quality, low cost meals to students across the country. For more information visit http://www.schoolnutrition.org.