



## Healthy School Meals

# How Can You Help?

Most schools offer meals through the federal school meal programs (e.g., National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program).<sup>1</sup> Meals served through these programs are required to meet nutrition standards and provide students with a variety of healthy foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free dairy products.<sup>2</sup> Students who eat school meals consume more milk, fruits, and vegetables and have better nutrient intake than those who do not participate in the meal programs.<sup>3,4</sup>

Knowing the answers to the following questions can help you support healthy school meals in your child's school. If you don't know the answers to these questions, check out the school handbook or school website, attend a school wellness meeting or Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meeting, or simply ask your child's teacher.

### What's Happening at School?

1. Does the school offer the National School Breakfast Program and the School Lunch Program?
2. Do teachers and school staff eat lunch with their students?
3. How long do students have to eat breakfast and lunch at schools?
4. Does the school provide recess before lunch?
5. Does the school include messages about the school meals during daily announcements?
6. Does the school promote the school meal programs through e-mail and written communications with parents? For example, is the school menu readily available to parents and students, and in the languages that reflect the student population?
7. Does the school use products that are locally grown or produced, such as milk, produce, meats, chicken, or fish in school meals?
8. Does the school offer foods that address the cultural practices of the student population?
9. Are there promotional posters or signage for the school meal program in the cafeteria and other locations in the school?
10. What other foods and beverages are in the cafeteria line alongside the school meals?





Photo courtesy / USDA



## Ideas for Parents

You can be involved in your child's school by **attending** meetings, workshops, or training events offered by the school; **communicating** with school staff and other parents; **volunteering** for school events or in your child's classroom; **reinforcing** healthy messages and practices your child learns at school; **helping** make decisions about health in the school; and **being part** of community activities supported by the school. Here are some specific ideas for how you can support your child's school in providing healthy school meals.

- Learn more about the **nutrition standards for school meals**.
- Eat school breakfast or lunch with your child.
- Review school menus with your child, and encourage them to try new menu items.
- If you have questions about items on the menu, ask the school to learn more. Sometimes food service directors don't market all the changes they are making (e.g., using whole grain bread or pizza dough).
- Offer to help with taste tests or other nutrition promotion activities in the cafeteria.
- Talk with other parents about the benefits of the school meal programs.<sup>1</sup>
- Join the school or district committee (e.g., wellness committee) that sets the policies for health and wellness, and work to include language about school meal programs.<sup>1,5</sup>
- Thank the school nutrition staff for preparing healthy meals for students. Work with other parents and school staff to provide special recognition for the school nutrition staff for serving healthy meals.



Check out additional resources for parents related to the school nutrition environment and services, physical education and physical activity, and managing chronic health conditions at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/P4HS.htm>.

## REFERENCES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School health guidelines to promote healthy eating and physical activity. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*. 2011;60(RR05):1-76.
2. Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. 42 U.S.C.A. Sect. 1758.
3. Condon EM, Crepinsek MK, Fox MK. School meals: types of foods offered to and consumed by children at lunch and breakfast. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2009;109(Suppl 2):S67-78.
4. Clark MA, Fox MK. Nutritional quality of the diets of U.S. public school children and the role of the school meals program. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2009;109(Suppl 2):S44-56.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Parent Engagement: Strategies for Involving Parents in School Health*. Atlanta: US Dept of Health and Human Services; 2012.

