



What makes a school meal?

Schools participating in the National School Lunch Program, which reimburses schools for lunches provided to kids in need, are required by law to serve meals that meet a variety of nutrition requirements. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act changes those standards significantly. The new standards, effective July 2012, bring better nutrition to schools. So what does that mean for *your* school?

A lot: “We’re taking a new look at how we’ve been doing things,” says Sandra Ford, the incoming president of the School Nutrition Association and Director of Food and Nutrition Services for Manatee County School District in Florida. “The changes will be challenging, but they’re the right things to do for kids.” Here’s how the updated standards will affect your child’s lunch tray:

	LUNCHES BEFORE	LUNCHES NOW
FAT	No limits on trans fats	School lunches must be trans fat-free.
CALORIES	School lunches had set calorie minimums, but not maximums.	Meals must meet age-appropriate calorie limits and portion sizes (elementary school lunches must be 550 to 650 calories and middle school lunches must be 600 to 700 calories).
SODIUM	Sodium levels were unregulated.	Schools must gradually reduce sodium levels in school meals until elementary school lunches contain fewer than 640 mg sodium and middle school lunches contain fewer than 710 mg.
FRUIT AND VEGETABLES	½ to ¾ cup combined fruit and veggie serving, with no specifications about what kind (that meant French fries were considered equal with broccoli!)	Schools are now required to serve at least ½ cup of fruit and ¾ cup of veggies each per meal, and there are weekly requirements for green, red or orange, and starchy vegetable offerings. Children must take at least one fruit or vegetable with their meal.
DAIRY	Plain or flavored whole milk and 2 percent milk were allowed.	Milk must be fat-free or 1 percent (flavored milk must be fat-free).
WHOLE GRAINS	Whole grains were encouraged, but not required.	Half of all grains offered must be whole-grain rich and within two years, all grains offered must be whole-grain rich.

What about snacks?

There currently are no federal nutrition standards governing competitive food choices, such as food sold in vending machines or a la carte items like chips or soft drinks. (Some states, like Texas, have passed legislation regulating these foods, and many local school districts have created their own guidelines, too.) To resolve this problem, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act requires the USDA to develop federal nutrition standards for competitive foods, which will be released in summer 2013. (The new standards will not apply to food brought from home, served in classroom parties, or sold through occasional bake sales and fundraisers.)

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The number of meals—in billions!—the National School Lunch program has served to students since its start in 1946. In 2011, the program served 31.8 million kids daily.

To see some of the creative ways schools are meeting these new standards and encouraging students to try healthier choices, visit traytalk.org.





Lunchtime conversation starters WITH YOUR FOOD SERVICE PROVIDER

What's the best way to find out how your child's school is meeting nutrition guidelines—and whether the food is as healthy as you'd like? Ask! Bring these questions along on National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day, and get the answers you need.

Make your conversation count

3 tips for a successful chat with your food service provider:

- **Find the right person.** Schools have different hierarchies, so ask who's in charge of day-to-day operations and of big decisions.
- **Be respectful and find common ground.** School staffs *want* to do what's best for kids. Start with that assumption, work to understand the school's challenges, and ask about goals. Together, you can find a project to tackle that serves the school's needs *and* your concerns.
- **Keep your perspective.** You can't change everything overnight, but every step counts.

How do you develop the menus?

How have your menus changed to meet the new USDA guidelines?

How are the lunches at our school funded?

What's your approach to organic and local food?

What is the difference between the main items in the lunch line and the extra things kids can buy?

How can we support your efforts to get students to try the healthier food choices?



Answers and inspiration 



Talking to food service providers

THE QUESTIONS—AND ANSWERS—YOU NEED

Complex federal regulations, tight school budgets, and more: There's a lot that goes into school meal programs, and these questions, answers, and inspirational ideas from schools doing a great job will help you better understand the food system at your child's school—and how YOU can help improve it.

How do you develop the menus?

The menu development process varies among school districts, so find out what goes into choosing what will be served every day. Who's on the team that develops the recipes and buys the food? How often do the offerings change? Ideally, you'll get answers that show you how much thought is put into each day's lunch.

GET INSPIRED: Some schools, like those in the Douglas County School District in Colorado, develop new menu items with the help of student and parent taste-testing. Others, like Manatee County School District in Florida, seek to provide students with a range of healthy choices so they can build the meal that's most appealing to them. "We always have at least three different fruits out," says Sandra Ford, Director of Food and Nutrition Services for Manatee County School District in Florida, and the incoming president of the School Nutrition Association. "If a student has three choices, chances are she'll like one of them."

How have your menus changed to meet the new USDA guidelines?

Schools participating in the National School Lunch Program are required by federal law to serve meals that meet a variety of

nutrition requirements. Learn about the changes in detail in the National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day toolkit, What makes a school meal? Some schools have had to make big menu changes to meet the new guidelines, but for others, it's just a matter of making existing menu items more prominent. Ask the food service professionals if they can compare a typical lunch from this year to one from last year, and you'll get a sense of what they've changed.

How are the lunches at our school funded?

By asking this question, you'll be able to learn more about the challenges the school faces in getting healthy food out on the lunch line. There might be money from the school district, the state, or the federal government; however, even when there's a federal reimbursement for meals served to low-income students, the amount often doesn't cover the real cost. So, schools rely heavily on student and faculty food purchases to cover the rest. Ask for a breakdown in where your child's lunch money goes—it can be fascinating to learn how schools stretch their dollars! In most cases, the federal reimbursement for free meals served to low-income students does not cover the cost of preparing and serving those meals.

What's your approach to organic and local food?

Choosing organic and locally-produced foods whenever possible is great for students and the environment, so find out whether the school has made efforts in those areas yet. Cost and availability may be hindering the food service director, but a willingness to discuss the topic and explain any limitations is a great place to start.

GET INSPIRED: At Manatee County School District, Ford likes to serve locally grown strawberries, tomatoes, and potatoes. At the Academy for Global Citizenship in Chicago (the public school that won a KIWI Crusaders award in 2011), all of the food is organic. "We spend about 60 cents more per meal than what the government allots us, but vendors have worked with us to find a middle ground that keeps us both in business, says Dan Schnitzer, AGC's director of sustainability and operations. As a charter school, they receive additional funding through grants, but they also find creative ways to save money by minimizing food waste and analyzing costs to develop less-expensive menus.

What is the difference between the main items in the lunch line and the extra things kids can buy?

School meals are the main entrée items and sides that make up the main school menu, and what the district receives a small reimbursement for by the federal government. These are the food items that are subject to the federal nutrition guidelines, so the food service professionals should be able to point out why each and every item is there, nutritionally speaking. The other things you'll see for sale (like snacks and beverages besides milk) are called a la carte items. They help fund the rest of the food being served and, depending on the school district, can run the gamut from whole grain granola bars to sugary sports drinks. Find out what a la carte items are offered at your school so that you can voice your opinion

on whether they are the best choices.

GET INSPIRED: Snacks for sale can be healthy: The "snack shack" at the Santa Clarita Valley International charter school in California sells only healthy treats (like whole grain bars, and nothing with high fructose corn syrup). It was started by a mom, Dawn Walker, and now run by the school's seventh graders.

How can we support your efforts to get students to try the healthier food choices?

Food service providers should be able to explain what they've learned about making healthy food appealing to children, thanks to their years working with kids. By telling them you want to support their efforts, you'll be reinforcing the idea that National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day is about building communication, so you can all work together for the benefit of the kids.

GET INSPIRED: Share your ideas for getting students excited about choosing lunch items that are better for them. Could the cafeteria host a tasting event? Offer comment cards to students and invite them to share their opinions? At Smithville Elementary School in Smithville, Texas, the school garden has provided inspiration to the kids to eat their greens: Being a "Junior Harvester" is a badge of honor now among the students, and their bounty supplies the cafeteria with herbs. At Westwood Elementary in Wellington, Ohio, physical education teacher, Kristy Holliday, created and performs the Broccoli Dance, Sweet Potato Dance and other vegetable dances when she sees that students have eaten all the vegetables on their trays. Students are now taking and eating their vegetables just so they can see Mrs. Holliday dance. Plus, the cafeteria also features a "Caught Eating Fruits and Vegetables" bulletin board. When students are "caught" eating their produce, they can have their pictures posted on the board. One student per grade is picked as the fruit and vegetable student of the week. Students love it!





Let's talk about lunch!

What does your child think about what's being served in the cafeteria? Ask her!

What's your favorite lunch to get at school?

Find out what he loves about it, and if he's leaving out a healthy component, look for ways for him to get the nutrients he needs. Expand the conversation, too: What do his friends like to eat? What would he eat if he could only eat one thing every day?

How do you choose what you eat in the cafeteria?

If she chooses the same thing every day, encourage her to occasionally mix things up to keep her taste buds from getting bored, and to make sure she's giving her body a variety of healthy nutrients. Before you head to her cafeteria, review the menu with your child to plan ahead for your visit—and for all lunches. Poor food choices are often the result of not taking time to consider all the lunch options beforehand.

What is your favorite vegetable on the school menu?

Instead of asking, "Do you like vegetables?" frame your discussion about veggies in a positive way. If he doesn't have an answer, then talk about ones worth trying, and encourage him to include one on his tray every day.

Are there things at school that you want me to try making at home?

Not only might you get some new ideas for dinner, but you'll find out more about the breadth of the school menu.

Do you eat everything on your tray?

Ask how much, and which foods, he typically leaves on his tray. Each item is there for a reason (veggies for fiber, a sandwich for protein,



dairy for calcium), so knowing what your child doesn't like or trades away will help you know what nutrients he needs by the time he gets home. (It's also the perfect opportunity to remind him how good, strong, and smart a healthy, balanced lunch will make him feel!) Plus, his answers will give you a starting point for discussing the lunch tray options with food service professionals.

Are you full after your meal at school?

If she's full, how full: Thanksgiving Day full or satisfied? She might be rushing through her lunch and not stopping to think about whether she's full, so encourage her to listen to what her body is telling her—if she feels full, it's okay to stop eating.

Is there anything that you want to eat at school that you don't see in the cafeteria?

Unless he says, "Candy bars!" you can use his ideas to talk to the food service provider about the menu options.

Do you have enough time for lunch?

In some schools, this can be a challenge. If it is for your child, start a conversation about it with your school's parent group. The timing for lunch is a big issue to tackle at many schools so you'll probably need support from other parents before talking to the principal.





NATIONAL
Take Your Parents to
LUNCH DAYSM
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What's for lunch?

Today's school lunches are required to be well-balanced meals that meet tough new federal nutrition standards, which means you shouldn't find any super-sizing in the lunch line. Less than 10 percent of calories can come from saturated fat; plus, the meals must offer students the right mix of low fat or fat free milk, fruits and vegetables, grains and meat (or a meat alternate). Schools must also eliminate trans fats from meals and cut back on sodium. This is what a well-balanced tray should include. Is it what you're seeing at your child's school?

The minimum two required servings of fruits or veggies a day is a great way for kids to take in a variety of healthy vitamins and nutrients. Orange veggies, such as carrots, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin, are good sources of vitamin A, which is important for a strong immune system. Dark green veggies, like broccoli, kale, and spinach are a great source of iron, a nutrient that's needed to make red blood cells. Schools must now offer at least one serving of dark green and red/orange veggies every week. Not only is serving veggies with low fat dip or salad dressing a guaranteed kid-pleaser, but it provides kids with a healthy dose of fat, a must-have for kids' brains and nervous systems to develop correctly. Plus, fat is essential for helping the body absorb certain vitamins, such as vitamins A, D, E, and K.



Schools know that milk does a kid's body good, which is why at least eight ounces of milk is part of the meal. Milk ranks among the top sources of calcium, vitamin D, protein, potassium, magnesium, riboflavin and zinc, making it especially important for kids' growing bones and overall development. Schools must offer fat free or 1% milk options to help keep excess dietary fat and cholesterol in check—you'll find all the protein of whole milk in the lighter milk options, but minus the extra fat and calories.



More than a satisfying treat for a sweet tooth, fruit is an important component of a well-balanced lunch tray. Schools are required to offer at least two daily servings of fruits, veggies, or both—and kids are now required to take one with every lunch. Fruits are good cholesterol-free sources of potassium, fiber, vitamin C, and folate, and most are naturally low in fat and calories. Fresh, whole fruit is best, but fruits canned in their own juices, as well as frozen or dried options, also offer loads of nutrition.

Pile up whole grain bread, lean protein, and veggies, and you've got a sandwich full of nutrition. The whole grain bread contains fiber plus vitamins and minerals, such as B-vitamins, magnesium, iron, and vitamin E. Move onto the sandwich filling, and you've got protein, the building block of bones, muscles, and blood. Schools must serve a lean protein with every meal, such as turkey or chicken, peanut butter, hardboiled egg, or yogurt.



Dear _____,

I'm writing to tell you about National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day, because I think it's a great opportunity for our school, _____. This exciting event, designed to celebrate and inspire healthy lunches, is supported by the School Nutrition Association, KIWI Magazine, and Stonyfield Organic Yogurt.

On October 17, 2012, parents around the country will visit their children's schools and eat lunch in the cafeteria. The goal is to learn more about what goes into putting together a healthy lunch, and for parents and school officials to open the lines of communication so we can all work together on providing kids with the healthiest lunches possible. This is also a great year to showcase how our school is meeting the government's new nutrition standards for school meals. If that date isn't ideal for our school, I'd like to suggest that it be held another day during National School Lunch Week, which runs from October 15 through October 19.

I would like to help organize this event so that parents can enjoy lunch with our children and learn about the healthy meals you serve. You can visit MyHealthySchool.com to find information for schools in planning a National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day event. It would be great to hear a presentation from you or a food service official, and there's a sample presentation on the website, along with a feedback form you can use so that we can continue the conversation after October 17. Plus, we could be featured in KIWI Magazine or on MyHealthySchool.com if we participate and take photos!

I look forward to talking with you further about planning a National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day event!

Sincerely,



You are invited

Please join your child for a meal in the school cafeteria to see the healthy (and delicious!) food we are serving every day. Learn how school meals are meeting new federal nutrition standards and let us know what you think about our lunch program!



Date:

October 17, 2012

Place:

Time:

Your child's scheduled lunch time:

Price:

RSVP:

National Take Your Parents to Lunch Day is a joint effort from KIWI Magazine, MyHealthySchool.com, the School Nutrition Association, and Stonyfield Organic Yogurt. The event is part of the School Lunch What's Cooking? campaign from the School Nutrition Association in support of National School Lunch Week (October 15-19).





Parents, tell us what you think!

School name: _____

Lunch period visited: _____

Your name and child's name (optional): _____

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- What lunch items did you try?
 - What were you happy to learn about our lunch program today?
 - What did you think of the taste?
 - Did anything disappoint you about lunch?
 - What did you think of the nutritional value?
 - What are we doing well?
 - Did you have a chance to speak with a food service professional, and what did you learn?
 - What can be improved?
 - What did you learn from sitting with your child to eat?
 - Do you have additional questions about our lunch program?

