



3 take action

Talk with the school nutrition director about your concerns.

- Ask the director about his/her challenges regarding nutritional planning. Ask if you can visit the school cafeteria and have a school meal one day.

Join with other organizations in your community that may be concerned or involved with school nutrition.

Get involved politically.

- Join or form a coalition or organization focused on making healthy changes in school food. Attend school board meetings and voice your concerns.

1 get educated

Know the basic nutritional guidelines.

- In your household, you might be the decision-maker about your family's nutrition goals. In a community, it helps to have a shared understanding of nutrition principles based on science. The federal government's *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* serve as the most influential and authoritative recommendations for what should be served in the schools.

Developed jointly by the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Health and Human Services and updated every five years (most recently in 2010), the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* provide advice on good dietary habits for health promotion and reducing risks for major chronic diseases.

School officials and food program managers follow the regulations and align their food offerings to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. It is important for stakeholders to understand this and bring forward proposals that take this into account.

Learn how school food service is financed.

- School food service revenues come from two primary sources: the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP); and student payments for the food they buy. In the main, there is no funding through the school district budget. Rather, they operate as a stand-alone business. Learn about the federal National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which provide varying levels of reimbursement for meals that meet federal nutrition standards.
- School nutrition directors typically need to manage all of the expenses associated with food service, from food procurement to labor to waste disposal, while running their budgets at a breakeven level. Management issues may vary from district to district. Find out exactly how the food service is financed in your district.



Start small.

Think big.

For additional resources on healthy school food, visit www.harvardpilgrim.org/foundation.



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from
soup to nuts



Tips on Moving
Toward Healthier
School Meals



From The Harvard
Pilgrim Health
Care Foundation

Everyone

from First Lady Michelle Obama to celebrity chef Jamie Oliver is talking about the need to teach American children healthier eating habits. Since children spend so much of their young lives in the classroom, it's only natural that people look to the schools to help shape this important life skill.

Some schools are leading the way, offering fresh fruit, roasted vegetables, and leaner meats, and inviting students to serve themselves from abundant salad bars. Dessert might be a smoothie made with low-fat yogurt and fruit.

But many schools lag behind, still serving too much food that is high in saturated and trans fats, sugar, and salt.

So what does it take to turn an "old school" lunch program into a healthy new one? Well, as the saying goes, it takes a village.

A Balancing Act

Whether you are a parent, school board member, superintendent, teacher, health care professional, or community member, you can play a role in promoting healthy food in school.

Fostering change begins by understanding the complexity of the school nutrition director's job, and the competing pressures that shape decisions. These nutrition services professionals are challenged on a daily basis to meet federal and other nutrition standards, serve meals that appeal to kids, and do it all on a razor-thin budget. It is not an easy job, and bringing about change requires support from all stakeholders.

To learn more about how school food service departments operate, see our companion report, *Dishing Out Healthy School Meals: How Efforts to Balance Meals and Budgets are Bearing Fruit*.



2

know your community

Understand relationships within the school district.

What and who directs the food service?

- In most districts, a school nutrition director manages the school lunch and breakfast programs. This director oversees managers, cafeteria workers, and/or other food service employees. The school food program, known by the government as a "school food authority," or SFA, is usually a semi-independent entity belonging to the school district. The school nutrition director may report to the school district's superintendent and/or school committee, and undoubtedly may get advice and input from principals, teachers, school nurses, parents, and sometimes even the students.
- Speak with your school district's leadership and find out who in your community has the greatest influence over policy decisions for the school food service.
- Learn about other organizations that may be working directly with your schools. These may include the Cooperative Extension Service of the US Department of Agriculture, a nationwide, non-credit educational network (<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/>); Farm to School (<http://www.farmtoschool.org/>); and other organizations.

Become informed about state and national regulations and policy.

- Learn what federal, state, and local regulations affect school food programs in your town. For example, Maine's "Chapter 51" prohibits the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value on school property. Recent Massachusetts legislation bans sugary drinks and other unhealthy foods from schools.
- Find out about organizations that are major players in childhood nutrition, like the School Nutrition Association. Look into others, too, such as the American Beverage Association, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, and William J. Clinton Foundation that supported programs to remove full-calorie soft drinks from schools.

Know your school district wellness policy.

- Find out about your local wellness policy. These policies are required by Congress for all educational agencies participating in a federal child nutrition program. They include specific nutrition guidelines for school meals and all foods available on campus. For copies of your local wellness policy, contact your district school superintendent's office or the district school nutrition director.



4

be constructive

Be a "booster" of the school food service

- Come to the table with enough knowledge and understanding to make positive contributions for progress.

Pick your battle.

- Prioritize your interests in school food improvement. Remember the constraints of school food service operations and look for ways that you can offer constructive feedback and suggestions. Look to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* as a source of information and ideas as you develop your list of priorities.

Work as a team.

- There is plenty of room for improvement in school food. To achieve the best results, look for ways to collaborate, be positive, and support the school food service and the school administration.

5

make changes

Embrace and celebrate incremental change.

- Improvement takes time. Communication among stakeholders requires time and patience, since not everyone will have the same priorities. Students need time to accept new foods. Changes have to fit within budgets and cash flows. Be patient.

For superintendents and school administrators: Involve parents in decision-making.

- For example, if the district is hiring a new school nutrition director, parents can be on the search committee. Make sure the community understands how important this individual is to the health of the children.

Know what you need in a top-notch school nutrition director.

- Look for someone whose primary focus is the health of the students. Someone with a blend of business savvy and sound nutrition sensibilities. And someone who can innovate, build internal and external relationships, and persevere in the face of obstacles.

So, get educated, know your community, take action, be constructive and make some changes. With these key strategies and the involvement of various community stakeholders, your school district can be on its way to dishing out healthier school food.

