

How about giving school lunch a second look?

School lunch has a bad rap. Does the thought of the school cafeteria conjure up images of mystery meat, instant mashed potatoes, and canned peas? Did you know that many of today's local school lunch programs are providing nutritious meals like roasted turkey salad on whole wheat or local Maine potato bar with all the fixings? The goal of the National School Lunch Program is to offer nutritious, tasty meals to students at an affordable price and in general, the local school nutrition programs do just that.

While the world of School Nutrition Programs is not exactly straightforward, school lunches do have to meet strict federal nutrition guidelines. Some of the guidelines make sense, but some of them are outdated. For example, school lunches must provide 1/3 of the recommended daily amounts of many vitamins and nutrients. But, despite skyrocketing obesity rates, they also have a minimum calorie requirement. By law, a high school student lunch must contain *at least* 825 calories! Fortunately, change is in the air, and calorie range guidelines are coming.

The other way students get food at school is through a la carte lines and vending machines. There are no effective nutrition guidelines for these 'grab and go' foods. At many schools, the foods available in a la carte lines and vending machines are high fat foods, like chips, french fries, cookies, ice cream and muffins. There is no need for these foods to be provided in schools.

So why are they offered? Why can't School Nutrition Programs just take away the unhealthy food and replace it with healthy food? Well, it's challenging for School Nutrition Programs to meet differing local and states standards for nutrition on the \$2.68 they may receive from the federal government. And that \$2.68 doesn't just go towards the meal; it has to pay for staff, benefits, equipment, repairs, technology and non-food items like trays, silverware, and napkins. \$2.68 doesn't cover the complete costs of running School Nutrition Programs and therefore, like it or not, schools may offer vending and a la carte items to balance the budget.

If you encourage your child to choose the school lunch rather than the competitive foods, you can rest assured that they will get at least 1/3 of their daily dose of protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, and calcium. You can't be so sure if they choose the chips and sport drinks from the a la carte and vending machine options available and are too full from a parent supplied cupcake party.

Another area of unhealthy food at school has nothing to do with the School Nutrition Program at all. It's the unhealthy cupcakes, pizza parties, slushies and ice cream socials that we all contribute to as families. When making strides to improve school nutrition, we must look at all the avenues that provide food for our kids, including ourselves.

While school's are continuing to improve the school meals, let's keep focused on reducing unhealthy foods and snacks from home, reducing high fat and high sugar foods served at classroom parties, removing unhealthy food sales to students through bake sales and fundraisers and understanding the barriers and constraints faced by our schools. Get involved, ask questions, and feel free to contact us about the exciting work that several local school districts are embarking on. Visit [www.letsgo.org](http://www.letsgo.org).

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