Healthy Food Choices Beyond the Cafeteria

10 Points  School  District

The school environment plays a fundamental role in shaping lifelong healthy behaviors and can have a powerful influence on students’ eating habits. The goal of this action is to promote healthy eating by encouraging schools to adopt policies and practices that increase the availability of healthy food choices beyond what is required by federal and state regulations. The action can be completed at the school district or individual school level. In order to earn points at the district level, the district must have a Wellness Policy that advances the integration of healthy food choices at activities and events outside the school day, in-school celebrations, and fundraisers. At the school level, a school must demonstrate that it has practices in place that reinforce the importance of healthy eating. Either the wellness policy or healthy eating practices must be in place during the current school year to be eligible for points. This can be achieved by requiring that healthy options are offered whenever food is served or sold in connection with school activities and/or by discouraging the promotion, sale, or distribution of unhealthy food and beverages in the school or by school related organizations (i.e. PTA, Booster Club, etc.).

Please note that nutrition education and awareness efforts by themselves would not qualify for points under this action. The goal is to change the type of food being offered or sold in connection with school events or activities that is not currently regulated.

Why is it important?

Seventeen percent of the nation’s children and adolescents are currently obese. Since 1984, the obesity rate has doubled for children and quadrupled for adolescents. If this pattern is not reversed, this generation of children could lead sicker, shorter lives than their parents’ generation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Schools are in a unique position to influence eating habits, and can be instrumental in reversing this trend. Additionally, aside from the more general negative consequences of poor nutrition, healthy eating overall corresponds to increases in academic test scores, and better class participation (National Center for Health Statistics, 2011).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA) sets nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Starting in the 2014-2015 school year, the USDA has expanded the regulations to cover all foods sold at school during the school day. The new Smart Snacks in School regulation applies to food sold a la carte in the cafeteria, in school stores and vending machines, and through in-school fundraisers. However, currently there are no standards for food and beverages served free-of-charge (i.e., during school celebrations), sold after school, off-campus, or on weekends (i.e. at school plays or sporting events), or fundraisers selling food not intended for consumption in schools (i.e., cookie dough or frozen pizza sales). Districts and schools committed to establishing and reinforcing lifelong healthy eating habits should not ignore these opportunities to promote healthy food choices.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

Champions for healthy eating initiatives can be anyone from the school community passionate about the topic, ranging from a school board member to groups of concerned parents, parent teacher associations, and/or students. While the champion can raise attention to the issue, in order to move forward in a constructive and productive way, it is important to engage key stakeholders early and often in the planning and implementation of an initiative. If a district or school has a School Wellness Council, the council should be the focal point of the effort. If a council does not exist, this initiative provides the perfect opportunity to get one started. See the Sustainable Jersey for Schools School Wellness Council.
action for guidance on effective School Wellness Councils.

**Timeframe**

The time needed to complete this action depends on the existing level of awareness and support for health and wellness in the school community. District policy development and adoption involves a formal process that, at minimum, could take several months to finalize language and include on board meeting agendas to gain approval (usually a district policy is reviewed at two meetings prior to adoption).

School level practices may take less time to implement than district policies if key stakeholders like the school principal, teachers, parents, booster clubs, school organizations, student clubs, and students are involved and feel part of the decision-making process. Conversely, if school level changes are implemented without the benefit of input from those impacted, a backlash could occur that thwarts implementation and ends up involving district administration and the school board.

**Project costs and resource needs**

The only costs associated with making healthy choices a standard practice for all school activities that involve food are staff and volunteer resources needed to educate the school community on the benefits of this effort. Extensive free resources are available to help develop and implement comprehensive district polices and school practices. See the Resources section of this action for more detail.

**What to do, and how to do it ("How to")**

This section provides guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. A school does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as it meets the requirements for earning points for this action.

It is important to realize that the entire food environment of the school matters: everyone in the school community needs to give students the same message about healthy eating through their words and actions. For example, it is inconsistent to prohibit food service providers from selling candy and soda at lunch but then allow parents to bring them in for school celebrations or sell them at a basketball game. In addition, offering less-nutritious food items in any circumstance contradicts nutrition messages taught in the classroom.

The goal is to establish a healthy school nutrition environment as a normal expectation of schools. Taking positive steps to implement district policies or school practices that support student health is a public demonstration of the school's commitment to promoting healthy behaviors among students, families, and the community at large. A champion, such as a parent, school nurse, physical education teacher, foodservice manager, or school principal, is usually the driving force behind changing food-related policies and practices. However, improving school nutrition involves multiple steps and teams with diverse skills and backgrounds. A useful starting point is to assess the current nutrition environment of the school to identify strengths and weaknesses. This will help the team develop an action plan and the rationale behind it.

**Key areas of focus may include:**

- **Food Sales at Activities and Events Outside the School Day:** A variety of foods are typically sold at sporting events, performances, and other school-related events in the evenings and on weekends to raise money for student or parent organizations. Common offerings include soft drinks, baked goods, salty snacks, candy, and fried foods. Increasing the variety of nutritious choices and decreasing the number of "empty calorie" items will make students more likely to choose nutrient-rich foods. Initially, those in charge of deciding what to sell may be reluctant to change citing uncertainty about students accepting new foods, increased costs, and reduced profits. However, finding ways to engage the school community can be key to successfully upgrading the nutritional value of products sold. Schools can provide students with opportunities to taste test new food offerings, or invite a mix of school, parent, and community officials to participate in the decision making process. In addition, research studies show that integrating healthy options can be done without a significant negative financial impact.

- **Celebrations during the School Day:** Promoting healthy options during meal or snack times while allowing unhealthy options during celebrations can confuse youth. Celebrations should be associated with healthy habits and activities rather than unhealthy options and consumption. Requiring foods such as juice, water, cheese trays, and fresh fruit
and vegetable trays at classroom parties and prohibiting things like soft drinks and chips will not detract from the celebration. Another option is to mandate that all foods for celebrations be prepared by the school food service. This approaches addressed concerns over food safety because of student allergies as well as over which foods are being consumed. Alternatively, non-food celebrations should be explored such as special kickball games, dance parties, or extra active recess time, etc.

- Fundraisers: One study on school fundraising found that 80% of clubs, teams, and parent organizations used food as a fundraising method. More alarming is that 76% sold chocolate, 67% sold baked goods, and 63% sold candy. The Center for Science in the Public Interest has an extensive toolkit on how school fundraising can be made healthy. They advise avoiding fundraisers centered on candy and baked goods and advocate non-food sales and others based on physical activity, such as walk-a-thons. For example, the School Wellness Council at Millville Senior High School in Plainfield, NJ decided to improve employee wellness with a healthy cookbook while raising money for student scholarships. Students helped provide the artwork for the cookbook. The cookbook was such a hit that they do it every year, with recipes that are more appealing to their student population.

If fundraising is focused around foods, that food should meet nutritional standards. In order to implement changes regarding fundraisers it is important to talk with PTO/PTA/PTSA representatives, the principal, coaches, school and booster clubs, out-of-school time site/program staff, parents, and food service staff about healthier fundraising options. Enlist students to research and develop healthy, profitable fundraising ideas and work closely with vendors to find creative ways to sell healthier food and beverage items. One creative approach successfully used in schools across the country is "farmraisers." Farmraisers are like a traditional school fundraiser, but they offer delicious, healthy farm products for sale to school communities. Children will go home with simple brochures detailing the available farm products for sale. Farmers get a good price for their quality products and potential new customers for their farm business. Schools add a markup that meets their fundraising goals.

- Using Food as a Reward: Food is often offered as an incentive or reward to students. Examples include a pizza party for the class that has the best attendance, or a piece of candy for a correct answer. Using food as a reward can contribute to the development of unhealthy habits that stick with children for life. Experts caution that food, even healthy foods, should never be used as a reward or reinforcement for students because it tempts students to over-consume food and may result in children tying food to emotions, such as feelings of accomplishment. The options for non-food rewards are limited only by imagination, time, and resources. Matching the reward with the action is an appropriate place to start. For example: Children who complete reading assignments can be rewarded with a book, magazine, or word-play activity book; students who complete a class project can receive a pencil or eraser; classes who behave well can be given extra time to play outside.

Successful strategies to promote healthy food choices will vary based on the dynamics of a school district or individual school. Listed below are a broad range of strategies — identified through case studies from across the country and supported by a review of the literature — that can be used to effectively implement healthy food choices throughout the school environment.

- Engage Students: Many schools have engaged students through taste-testing sessions to gauge acceptance of new products and to solicit feedback for successful planning. When students are asked to give feedback they feel that people are listening and care about their opinions. Students can also be part of the process through student-led marketing campaigns to promote healthier options. Making it into a contest adds excitement to eating healthfully while also educating students on the importance of nutrition and healthy living. It is also a way to put students in charge of sending the message to their peers that eating healthy is the thing to do.

- Expand Nutrition Education: Nutrition education is regarded as one of the most important aspects of changing the culture of the school community to embrace healthy food options. It can be integrated into academic subjects or can be incorporated into after school athletics programs to reinforce how healthy eating affects athletic performance.

- Encourage Staff to Lead by Example: School staff can be a critical element in a school's transition to healthier food choices by modeling healthy behaviors and reinforcing what is taught in the classroom.

- Timing Matters: Major changes to policies and practices regarding foods are likely to be better received at the
beginning of a brand new school year; in contrast, opposition to change is likely to be at its peak if sudden changes are implemented during the middle of a term.

- Use an Incremental Approach: Student acceptance of different food choices is a primary concern. With incremental changes, students are allowed to adapt to new policies and practices involving foods over time. Many schools found that making smaller changes over a few years gives students time for their tastes to adjust and resulted in smoother transitions and less pushback from students along the way. For example, a school could start by offering healthier food items as options and then transition to requiring that all food options meet the nutrition recommendations.

- Involve Parents: Involving parents in the process of change helps districts and schools educate them about nutrition beyond the school day. Having healthy options at home reinforces the changes at school.

- Marketing: Get the Message Out: Districts and schools need to get the message out about healthy eating and provide sound rationale for implementing new policies or practices. Schools should consider communications strategies and messaging to staff, students and parents.

What to submit to earn points for this action

To earn points at the district level, the district's Wellness Policy must identify standards for including healthy choices for food sold or provided at school-related activities and events outside the school day, offered at in-school celebrations, and included as part of fundraisers conducted by school-related organizations. To earn points at the school level, a school must demonstrate that it has practices in place to ensure that healthy options are offered whenever food is provided or sold in connection with school activities and/or to discourage the promotion, sale, or distribution of unhealthy food and beverages in the school or by school-related organizations. Nutrition education and awareness efforts by themselves would not qualify for points under this action. The goal is to change the type of food being offered or sold in connection with school events or activities that is not currently regulated.

Please submit the following documentation as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met.

1. Description of Implementation – In the text box provided on the submission page for this action provide a short summary (about 300 words or less) of the district policies or school practices implemented and how it has impacted students, staff, and the greater school community.

2. Upload a copy of the district's Wellness Policy (district level) OR documentation of school-level initiatives that promote healthy food choices beyond what is required by federal and state law or regulation. School-level documentation should include a summary of the practices in place during the current school year, partners involved, reports/evaluations, etc.

3. Upload copies of student and parent outreach materials used to share information about the district policy adoption or school healthy food practices in place during the current school year. Materials can include articles, website postings, newsletters or information sent home to parents.

Resubmission Requirements

To earn points again after an approval has expired, the narrative and documentation must be updated to verify that the policies or practices are still in effect and information regarding them have been shared with the school community in the current academic year.

Approved Action Expiration Date

Approved actions will expire on August 31, one year after the certification application was submitted. For example, in a 2020 application the approval would expire on August 31, 2021.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended.

All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended for public viewing.
Spotlight: What New Jersey schools are doing

Bergenfield High School, Bergenfield Public Schools
Bergenfield Board of Education has adopted and implemented the comprehensive Wellness Policy which endeavors to create and promote healthy choices by our students in their personal, academic, developmental, and social spheres. The policy outlines the District’s approach to ensuring environments and opportunities for all students to practice healthy eating and physical activities throughout the school day. To view Bergenfield High School’s approved submission click here.

Montclair Public Schools
Montclair parents worked with school administrators, teachers, and the Partners for Health Foundation to come up with The Montclair Food Guide Fuel for School. The guide provides options for snacks, parties, and events at school. Their “commonsense” approach sets down a 70/30 guideline: 70% of the snacks coming from a healthy-choice selection and 30% from less nutritious choices, including sweets. School snack choices are grouped into three categories based on their relative nutritional value: Green Light, Yellow Light, and Red Light. - Fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain items, low-fat dairy and non-soda beverages occupy the “Green Light” category, and can be offered to students freely. - Processed fruits with some added sugar; products without whole grain but with added sugar such as pretzels, crackers and cookies; and flavored milk and yogurt products are in a “Yellow Light” category that are to be offered sparingly. - Candies, cakes, and other food items with refined sweeteners; trans fats; hydrogenated oils; high fructose corn syrup; and artificial colors and flavorings are in a “Red Light” category that should be avoided if possible.

Parents are allowed to bring in cupcakes and candy, provided they are part of a larger selection of items, with 70% of those snack choices coming from the “Green Light” list. They believe this system teaches moderation and encourages youngsters to make the correct food choices and provides relief for some parents because it takes the pressure off of parents who worry about what to bring in for their child’s birthday.

Resources

ORGANIZATIONS

Action for Healthy Kids New Jersey: The New Jersey Action for Healthy Kids Team is committed to engaging the many representatives from statewide organizations and agencies around promoting healthy eating and active living for all New Jersey youth. http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/in-your-state/new-jersey/about

The Alliance for Healthier Generation’s Healthy Schools Program: Founded by the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation, the Alliance works to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity and to empower kids to develop lifelong, healthy habits. The Healthy Schools Program takes a comprehensive approach to helping schools create healthier environments by increasing physical activity and healthy eating for students and staff. www.healthiergeneration.org/

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, along with the School Nutrition Association, created tools to help schools implement the Smart Snacks in School guidelines. Tools include a venue survey to determine where snacks are sold and served, a Product Calculator to determine if foods in schools meet the guidelines, and a Product Navigator to find new healthy snacks. There are also communications tools and on-demand learning opportunities to help you gain skills to make healthy changes to snacks in school. https://www.healthiergeneration.org/take_action/schools/snacks_and_beverages/smart_snacks/.

- Resources for fundraisers that raise revenue without selling unhealthy foods can be found here: https://www.healthiergeneration.org/take_action/schools/snacks_and_beverages/fundraisers/.

- Ideas for school celebrations without the cupcakes and sweet treats, plus sample letters to communicate the changes to parents can be found here: https://www.healthiergeneration.org/take_action/schools/snacks_and_beverages/celebrations/

Bridging the Gap: Bridging the Gap is a nationally-recognized research program. Our goal is to improve the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity, and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/
Relevant Bridging the Gap and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Briefs include:

- **Local School Wellness Policies: Where Do They Stand and What Can You Do?**

- **Creating Supportive School Nutrition Environments**

- **Marketing and Promotion of Foods and Beverages at School**

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Adolescent and School Health:**
CDC provides evidence-based guidance for schools on how to implement policies and practices that effectively promote healthy choices and behaviors among youth.

**Chef Ann Foundation:** Chef Ann's vision was to create an organization that helps schools take action so that every child has daily access to fresh, healthy food. Today, the Chef Ann Foundation (CAF) carries out that vision by actively supporting school districts nationwide through grant programs and by providing tried and tested tools for school food change.
[http://www.chefannfoundation.org](http://www.chefannfoundation.org)

**New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA)** offers Policy Services which have district sample policies and NJSBA developed samples to support sustainability initiatives that are not required by law and an option for the school district. We have model policy samples for topics required by law or state monitored. Policy services are also available to help board members and administrators develop customized policy language to meet your needs. These resources are available to NJSBA members only (public school district staff and board members). All public and charter schools in New Jersey are dues paying members for these services; please contact your administration or local board members for access.
[https://www.njsba.org/services/sustainability/](https://www.njsba.org/services/sustainability/)

**Rutgers Cooperative Extension:** The Department of Family and Community Health Sciences (FCHS), a community-based nutrition, health promotion, and family wellness outreach component of Rutgers Cooperative Extension, provides workshops and on-line resources to educate and support families, worksites, schools, and communities to create healthier lifestyles.
[http://njaes.rutgers.edu/fchs/](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/fchs/)

- **Conducting Taste-Testing Activities in Schools: A Guide for Teachers and Administrators**
  [http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/fs1210/](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/fs1210/)

- **Creating a Taste-Testing Event: A Resource for School Nutrition Professionals**
  [http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/fs1227/](http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/fs1227/)

- **School and Family Partnerships Promote School Wellness**

**US Department of Agriculture** Tools for Schools: Tools for Schools offers topic-specific policy and resource materials to assist schools in meeting nutrition standards. Refer to the latest regulations, find free nutrition education curricula, or get ideas for adding tasty, kid-friendly foods to enhance your school meals program.

- **Smart Snacks in School Fundraisers**

- **Smart Snacks in Schools Standards**
  [https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/allfoods-flyer.pdf](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/allfoods-flyer.pdf)

- **Smart Snacks in Schools Summary and Exemptions**
  [https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/allfoods-summarychart.pdf](https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/cn/allfoods-summarychart.pdf)

- **Smart Snacks Tools**
**MATERIALS AND PUBLICATIONS**


**The Center for Science in the Public Interest** Fundraising Toolkit [http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfundraising.pdf](http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfundraising.pdf)


**Valley Food & Farm**, FarmRaiser Tools [http://www.vitalcommunities.org/agriculture/farmraiser.cfm](http://www.vitalcommunities.org/agriculture/farmraiser.cfm)