Healthier Foods at School

Healthy Food Options at School
Healthy eating is important for growth, good health, and academic performance. However, kids are often overwhelmed with access and availability of foods that are high in fat, sugar and sodium but low in nutrients. This increases their chances of obesity and a future of serious health problems, including Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep apnea and orthopedic problems.

The types of food and beverages made available to kids greatly influence their lifelong eating habits. Foods of good nutritional content (e.g. fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy foods, and low-fat grain products) should be served in cafeteria meals and also made available whenever and wherever food is sold or otherwise offered at school. Here are some suggestions for providing nutritious foods at school.

Vending Machines & School Stores: Most of the foods sold in vending machines are junk foods with few nutrients. Junk foods contain "empty calories," with most of the calories coming from fat and/or sugar.

Some vending machines also offer healthier options called "Smart Choice" foods. Schools and county governments are beginning to adopt healthy vending machine policies requiring food and beverages sold to meet specified nutrition standards. These standards address total calories, percent calories from fat and sugar, saturated fat, trans fats, and sodium per serving.

A general recommendation is to choose healthier options that have less than 6 grams of fat and less than 7 grams of sugar, or less than 40 percent added sugar by weight (not counting nuts, seeds and dried fruit). Healthier options also should contain less than 300 mgs of sodium per serving.

Here are a few vending machine food options that are healthy, tasty, accessible and affordable:

Non-perishable Items:
- dried fruit (raisins, cranberries, apricots, etc.)
- trail mix
- fig bars
- low-fat granola bars
- low-fat breakfast bars
- ready-to-eat cereal (low sugar, whole grain)
- whole grain crackers
- animal or graham crackers
- low-fat popcorn
- baked chips
- pretzels
- nuts and seeds (plain or with spices)
- pistachios
- canned fruit cups (not in heavy syrup)
- rice cakes
- crispy rice treats
- unsweetened applesauce

Perishable Items:
- frozen fruit or fruit juice bars (no sugar or high fructose corn syrup)
- frozen yogurt
- fruit or vegetable juice (100% juice)
- low-fat or light yogurt
- fresh fruit, individually packaged
- fresh fruit and yogurt parfait
- low-fat string cheese, cheese sticks, or cheese cubes
Vending machines containing food and beverages should not be placed in elementary schools. Machines in middle, junior high and high schools should contain only healthy snacks. Schools should not have vending service available during meal times, and preferably not within an hour before and after the meal service.

The John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition assessed many vending and snack products and compared them to the Massachusetts A La Carte Food & Beverage Standards to Promote a Healthier School Environment. The Institute then developed an A-List of products that meet these standards. This list contains "A-ceptable" vending items listed by product and manufacturer and expands as food companies introduce new products to the marketplace.

http://www.johnstalkerinstitute.org/vending%20proj ect/healthysnacks.htm

(The John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition is a partnership of the Massachusetts Department of Education, Nutrition Programs and Food Services, and Framingham State College.)

**Beverages:** Soft drink sales in schools are a growing concern. A regular 20-ounce soft drink contains "empty calories" and no nutrients. It has as much sugar as three average sized milk chocolate bars (1.55 ounces each) or 2½ cups of ice cream.

Kids are drinking more soft drinks, which is considered one of the key factors in the increase of childhood obesity. Teens drink twice as much soda as milk, and teen boys drink an average of three cans of soda a day.

Consider handling soft drink sales this way:
- If soft drinks are sold at school, price the healthy beverage options less than the sodas.
- Consider banning soft drinks from elementary and middle schools.
- Allow soft drinks to be sold in high schools only after the close of the school day.
- Allow only moderate sized containers (12 oz. rather than 20 oz.) to be sold.

Provide students more access to healthy beverages such as:
- bottled water (non-carbonated, no added artificial sweeteners, sugar, or caffeine)
- flavored (unsweetened) water
- 100% fruit or vegetable juice
- nonfat or 1% milk*
- nonfat or 1% chocolate (or other flavor) milk*

*Set milk prices to be comparable to other vended beverage prices, and keep the machine well stocked with a variety of flavored milks, which are big sellers. Keep milk cool, below 42°F at all times.

"We determined collectively with our (School) Board that the health of our students was not for sale." National Speaker Ron Epps, Richland County, South Carolina School Superintendent (after turning down a contract with the soft drink industry).

**Concession Stands:** Sell these healthier alternatives at games and other school events with concessions:
- grilled chicken sandwiches
- tortilla wraps
  - turkey & Swiss
  - ham & cheddar
  - chicken Caesar
  - chicken fajita
  - vegetarian
- hearty garden salads
- lean meat sub sandwiches
- lean turkey chili
- baked chips and salsa
- fresh fruit, granola and yogurt parfaits
- granola bars
- frozen yogurt (topping options: fresh or canned fruit (e.g. peaches) or nuts)
- individualized trail mix
  - raisins
  - dried cranberries
  - dried fruit
  - seeds
  - nuts
  - banana chips
  - carob chips
- soy nuts
- soft pretzels (topping options: oats, cinnamon, garlic, mustard and other spices)
- low-fat popcorn/caramel corn
- animal crackers
- low-fat crackers
- bottled and/or flavored water
- 100% fruit or vegetable juice
- single serve low-fat milk
Healthy foods are addictive. The more you eat them the more you want them.

**Fundraisers:** When fundraising supports student health, the school's health message demonstrates a commitment to promoting healthy behaviors among students, families, and the community.

A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 2000 reported that 82% of schools used food and beverages for fundraising activities. Of the schools studied: 76% sold chocolate candy; 67% sold cookies, crackers, cakes, pastries, or other baked goods; 63% sold candy other than chocolate; 37% sold soft drinks, sports drinks, or fruit drinks; and 28% sold fruits or vegetables.\(^5\)

Consider These Healthy Foods, Non-food Items & Events for Your Next Fundraiser:

- bags of fresh and exotic fruit
- nuts
- high quality potatoes and onions
- low-fat popcorn
- candles
- plants, garden seeds, flowers or bulbs
- holiday ornaments
- school spirit gear
- stadium pillows
- license plate holders with the school logo
- greeting cards or gift wrap/gift wrapping
- magazine subscriptions
- raffles of gift baskets
- temporary tattoos or face painting
- car washes
- silent auctions
- dog/cat bathing or pet sitting
- discounts on services such as oil changes or dry cleaning
- school supplies sold through a back-to-school project (Buy in bulk, then package for parents and deliver to students.)
- seasonal "message grams" or singing telegrams (e.g. birthdays, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day)
- ticket sales to a parent-teacher talent show, play or concert
- a student fashion show-sell tickets and work with local merchants, who provide coupon giveaways for new clothes
- student-made scrapbooks, cookbooks or art sold either at school, through silent auctions, or in craft booths at local fairs
- an academic contest with sponsors providing money based on the number of books read or math problems solved
- a dance, skate night, golf tournament, bowling night or family bingo night
- a "parents night out," offering group babysitting for a fee
- a bike-, walk-, jump rope- or jog-a-thon
- "hire a student day" for odd jobs (with proceeds going to the school)
- clean up stadium or auditorium after events

**Food for Thought:** You are teaching healthier options to improve the quality of life for kids and adults.

**Snacks & Celebrations:** Parents, as well as teachers, should provide healthy snacks and food for special celebrations (e.g. birthdays, Halloween, Valentine's Day). Healthy classroom snacks give kids a chance to try new foods they may not have at home. Some easy, nutritious snacks include:

- fresh fruit
- fruit and yogurt parfait
- vegetable tray with low fat dip
- animal crackers
- frozen yogurt/frozen yogurt bar (topping options: fresh or canned fruit (e.g. peaches) or nuts)
- low-fat or light yogurt
- low-fat breakfast or granola bars
- low-fat popcorn
- rice cakes
- unsweetened applesauce
- trail mix/trail mix bars
  - raisins
  - dried cranberries
  - dried fruit
  - seeds
  - nuts
  - banana chips
  - carob chips

Celebrations do not always have to include food. Here are a few non-food ideas:

- give time off on Friday afternoon
- allow extra time in a favorite class area
- hold the class outside
- award an afternoon free of homework
- bring music and balloons for a class party after a big test or before winter vacation
- sponsor an evening dance, a "DVD Day" for watching a movie, or a pep rally before an important test

For related information, refer to HGIC 4110, Non-Food Rewards for Kids.

Serving children unhealthy food is "penny wise and pound foolish." Poor nutrition today equals higher health costs tomorrow.

Sources:
2. Lexington - Fayette County Health Department, Kentucky. Food for Thought - Healthy Food Guidelines for Schools. http://www.lexingtonhealthdepartment.org/uploadedFiles/Programs/Youth_Services_Documents_and_Brochures/food%20for%20thought%202006.pdf

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by J. G. Hunter, HGIC Nutrition Specialist, and K. L. Cason, Professor, State EFNEP Coordinator, Clemson University. (New 03/07.)

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