

### FOOD IN SCHOOL

#### Issue Thumbnail

America's obesity epidemic isn't limited to adults -- one-third of American children age 2-19 are overweight or obese. During school days, children consume as many as half their daily calories at school. As a result, the food kids eat at school can either be a significant opportunity to curb America's childhood obesity epidemic or a significant challenge.

#### Issue Background

The National School Lunch Program provides over 30 million meals to kids across the country every day—for many children the breakfast and lunch they receive at school could be half the food they eat in an entire day.

A combination of factors, including budget constraints, lack of equipment, and academic time pressures, have prevented the program from living up to its promise of providing healthful and appealing meals in every school. The last full review of the National School Lunch Program found that while 94% of school lunches met or exceeded the vitamin and mineral requirements, they exceeded the federal limits for fat and saturated fat.

In January 2012, new nutritional guidelines were introduced for the School Lunch and Breakfast programs. Among other things, the guidelines promise to ensure students are offered both fruits and vegetables every day of the week; increase offerings of whole-grain rich foods; reduce saturated fat, trans fat and sodium; and limit portion sizes according to the age of the children served. Interest and involvement from parents and communities across the country will help determine the success of these new guidelines.

The cafeteria isn't the only source of food for kids on campus. School lunches frequently compete with close-by fast food restaurants and food and beverages sold at school that are outside of the school lunch program. These include vending machines full of unhealthy foods and sugar-sweetened beverages, student stores and a la carte items sold in the cafeteria. These so-called competitive foods and the food children bring from home also factor into the school food equation.

Access to water is also an issue in schools. In December 2010, President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act into law including a provision to require free drinking water to be available with school meals. As a healthy alternative to sugary drinks, water is also perfect for obesity prevention.

# THE WEIGHT OF THE NATION

## Community Activation Kit: Topics

### Key Stats

- 20 percent of students eat breakfast, 40 percent have a snack, and 90 percent eat lunch at school.
- Food consumed at school can contribute as much as 50 percent of children's daily caloric intake on school days.
- Currently, over 31 million kids participate in the National School Lunch Program, and more than 12 million participate in the School Breakfast Program.
  - Free or reduced-cost meals are available to students whose family income is at or below 130 percent of the poverty line, or between 130 percent and 185 percent, respectively.
- 94 percent of American schools served meals that met vitamin and mineral requirements, but exceeded federal limits for fat and saturated fat.
- On-campus vending machines with sugar-sweetened beverages can be a significant source of unhealthy calories for children at school.
  - Soda is the number one source of added sugar in American children's and adolescents' diet.
  - 20 percent of teens drink three or more sugar-sweetened beverages every day, the caloric equivalent of an extra meal.
- A recent survey in California found that more than 40 percent of responding schools reported no access to free water in cafeterias

### Watch More

- The third film in *The Weight of the Nation* series, *Children in Crisis*, includes an in-depth discussion of the food children consume in America's schools and its effect on the childhood obesity epidemic. The accompanying discussion guide provides additional information.
- *Consequences*, the first film in *The Weight of the Nation* series, includes a section of the prevalence and health implications of childhood obesity. The film's discussion guide includes more information.
- In the fall of 2012, HBO will release two additional short films that highlight student-led efforts to bring healthier food to school lunch rooms. All films can be found on HBO's *The Weight of the Nation* website at <http://theweightofthenation.hbo.com/>.

### Learn More

- HBO's *The Weight of the Nation* website (<http://theweightofthenation.hbo.com/>) features a Schools and Early Care section where the school lunch and breakfast program and competitive foods are discussed in detail.
- Read more about the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/breakfast/>).

# THE WEIGHT OF THE NATION

## Community Activation Kit: Topics

- The importance of providing nutritious school meals for the health of our nation's children is reflected in the USDA's new nutrition standards for school meals (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Legislation/nutritionstandards.htm>).
- Watch an 11-minute video conversation (<http://vimeo.com/32680939>) with Michael Pollan (U.C. Berkeley journalism professor and author of *Food Rules* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*) and Teresa Chin (Kaiser Permanente 2010-11 Health Policy Journalism Fellow) about school lunches.
- Learn more about strategies to create healthier school food environments (<http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org/>) and novel farm-to-school programs (<http://www.farmentoschool.org/>).
- Find out more about efforts to increase access to water (<http://www.waterinschools.org/>) and decrease access to sugar-sweetened beverages in schools (<http://www.kickthecan.info/>).
- Read the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's fact sheet on The Obesity Epidemic and United States Students ([http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/pdf/us\\_obesity\\_combo.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/pdf/us_obesity_combo.pdf)).

### Do More

- Get involved with your child's school.
- Learn about the school's priorities, engage with other parents, and share your views at school committee meetings.
- Always pack a fruit and a vegetable in your child's lunch.
- Consider ways to celebrate special occasions at school with healthy food, or even better, celebrate in ways that do not include food.
- Find alternatives to school fundraisers (<http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfundraising.pdf>) that raise money by selling food, candy or beverages. Work to bring a salad bar to your local school through the Let's Move Salad Bars 2 School (<http://goo.gl/AUo8T>).
- Support school food procurement efforts (<http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org/>) that source cafeteria food from local farms.
- Join the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthier Schools Program (<https://schools.healthiergeneration.org/>).
- Find other healthy eating and active living strategies that might make sense for your organization or community by using the Action Strategies for Healthy Communities Toolkit (<http://goo.gl/2iHxm>) or the Environmental Nutrition and Activity Community Tool (ENACT) (<http://goo.gl/LJhuO>).