

What's for Lunch in North Carolina's Public Schools—Healthy Foods or Healthy Finances?

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Imagine for a moment a dining room designed for students: inviting, comfortable, and relaxing, with brightly colored walls decked with age-appropriate décor that promotes healthy foods and beverages. The room is filled with the slightly sweet aroma of school-baked whole grain yeast rolls and the fragrance of fresh fruits. Picture the vivid colors of recently washed fresh vegetables: red, green, yellow, orange, and purple. You can still see the tiny water droplets on their surfaces. Now imagine children who have just come in from recess or other physical activities; they are filled with laughter, excitement, and a healthy appetite. After stopping to wash their hands, the students proceed in an orderly manner into the dining room, which is one of their favorite places on the school campus. Upon entering, students are greeted by school nutrition personnel who know their names and who speak to each child in a tone that is uplifting and encouraging. As children begin to select their favorite foods from a wide variety of healthful, student-appealing options, they are reminded of what they learned earlier in the day about making healthy food choices when the teacher included a mini-nutrition lesson while covering the unit on fractions. Teachers and other school personnel are available in the dining room to encourage healthful choices by making positive comments about school meals and by subtly reminding students to practice what they learned in the classroom. Teachers praise students' healthful food and beverage choices, and they also serve as role models for students by making healthful food choices themselves. In this dining room, all students have the same food and beverage choices; there is no meal service for children who receive free meals and another for children who purchase their meals. All children are treated equally and respectfully. Once they make their food and beverage choices, students are seated with their peers where they are encouraged to socialize with each other in the full 20 to 30 minutes they have to enjoy their meal. They eat slowly and thoughtfully and display appropriate table manners. When they finish their meals, they return to their classrooms, well-nourished, satisfied, and prepared to learn.

What you have just imagined is the vision of thousands of child nutrition professionals for an optimal school meals environment in all of North Carolina's public schools. This vision would transform the institutional cafeterias of yesteryear into centers for the development of lifelong healthful eating habits where all foods and beverages available to students are wholesome, nutritious, appealing, and affordable.

Some of the conditions described above are already present in North Carolina's public schools. Many newly-constructed schools have dining rooms that are inviting, staffed by competent, caring school nutrition personnel who are committed to preparing and serving the highest quality, most nutritious meals possible. Every day, in every school dining room in the state, students have the option to make healthful food and beverage choices. When students select the "reimbursable meal" they are assured

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of having a meal that is consistent with the recommendations reflected in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.¹ Unfortunately, the choice is not that simple. Favorites such as double cheeseburgers, french fries, big cookies, and sweetened iced tea compete with healthful foods like fresh salads topped with locally grown vegetables and low-fat dressing; sandwich wraps made with whole grain tortillas; pizza made with a hearty whole grain crust, low-fat mozzarella cheese, and an abundance of vegetable toppings; fresh fruits in season; and low-fat or skim milk.

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Some may ask why healthy foods have to compete with less healthful ones. The answer is simple: finances. The expectation for most Child Nutrition Programs in North Carolina is to be financially self-supporting. This means the program has to generate revenues from the sale of foods and beverages to students to purchase food and food preparation/service supplies, to pay salaries and benefits of school nutrition personnel, to purchase and/or repair commercial food service equipment, and to pay indirect costs to the school district. Essentially, the program has to generate enough revenue to pay for every expense borne by the program.

It hasn't always been this way. The National School Lunch Act² (NSLA) was signed into law in 1946 shortly after World War II. Military leaders were convinced the nation was vulnerable because many of its youth were malnourished and consequently were rejected for military service. To address the problem of malnutrition among the nation's youth while protecting the health and well-being of the nation, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was created. When President Harry S. Truman signed the NSLA, he read from the preamble of the Act which stated, "the program shall be a partnership of federal, state, and local governments." For the first four decades the NSLP was in operation, decisions made in the Child Nutrition Program were based on one guiding principle: what is in the best interest of the child? Food and beverage selections were made based on this principle; the amount of time for students to consume their meals was based on this principle; the time of day the meal was served was based on this principle. Federal, state, and local funds or in-kind support were available to support the program based on this principle.

In the early 1980s a massive federal budget-cut threatened to shut down the school meals program nationwide. Schools looked for creative ways to generate revenues to enable the program to continue to serve meals to students despite inadequate funds. Fortunately, in North Carolina, no school cafeteria closed its doors to students during this time; all continued to operate. They did so by selling extra servings of foods and beverages to students who could afford to purchase them. What was originally known as "supplemental school meal sales" that were needed to sustain the program through a budgetary crisis evolved into what is today known as the *a la carte* program. With greater emphasis placed on *a la carte* meals instead of reimbursable meals, the guiding principle for the Child Nutrition Program shifted. The principle of "doing the right thing for children" was gradually replaced with the principle "what will generate the most revenue?"

As a result of this shift in decision-making that placed the generation of revenues over the nutrition needs of students, several types of meals are offered to students in North Carolina's public schools. There are reimbursable meals, *a la carte* meals/snacks, and snacks that are vended on the school campus (which constitute meals for many students).

Reimbursable meals are prepared and served under the regulations of the federally-funded National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program (SBP). These meals are referred to as "reimbursable" because the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) reimburses school districts for a portion of the cost of each meal served to students. In addition to cash

subsidies, school districts participating in the NSLP and SBP receive commodity foods from the USDA to support the service of reimbursable meals. In return for the cash subsidies and commodities, participating schools must serve breakfasts and lunches at no cost or at a reduced price to students whose household incomes make them eligible for the meal benefits. In addition, breakfasts and lunches that are reimbursable must meet federal nutrition requirements.

A typical reimbursable school lunch may include an entrée, two or more servings of fruits and vegetables, a serving of a grain product, and eight ounces of low-fat or non-fat milk. Reimbursable school meals are healthy meals. Over the course of a week, reimbursable school meals must meet the nutrition standards outlined in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.¹ In North Carolina, reimbursable school meals must contain no more than 35% of calories from fat and less than 10% from saturated fat. School breakfasts must provide one-fourth of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, and calcium, while school lunches must provide one-third of the RDA for these nutrients.

Everyone benefits when children select the reimbursable school meal. Students benefit because they receive a wholesome, nutritious meal that is planned to contribute to their optimal growth, development, and success in the classroom. Research suggests that students who select reimbursable school meals consume less total and saturated fat, eat more fruits and vegetables, drink more milk, are less likely to drink sweetened beverages, and are more likely to be a healthy weight than students who select school meals from other venues. Parents benefit because the reimbursable school meal offers a convenient method of providing nutritionally balanced meals for children at school at the lowest possible price. Schools benefit because when students are adequately nourished, their academic performance improves, they have fewer attendance and discipline problems, and are more attentive in class.

In addition to reimbursable meals, students may select from a variety of foods and beverages sold *a la carte*. Unlike the reimbursable meal that is priced as a unit for all meal components, thus providing a balanced meal, *a la carte* items are priced and sold individually. Foods and beverages sold *a la carte* are often referred to as "competitive foods" because they compete with reimbursable meals for students' appetites and for their lunch money. These items are available at a much higher cost to students than the reimbursable meal. A single item may cost twice the amount of an entire meal. Nonetheless, schools generate significant revenues from these foods and beverages. In North Carolina, the most popular *a la carte* items include specialty sandwiches, french fries, pizza, cookies, snack cakes, fruit punch, chips, ice cream, sports drinks, and sweetened iced tea. Unlike the reimbursable meal, there are no nutrition standards for *a la carte* foods and beverages.

In addition to reimbursable and *a la carte* meals made available to students in the school cafeteria, there are many other food and beverage options available to students on the school campus. These options include school-operated vending machines, school stores and snack bars, school fundraisers, and school

concessions. There are no nutrition standards for foods and beverages available to students in these areas of the school campus. Like *a la carte* items, foods and beverages sold in these venues compete with the federally-funded NSLP and SBP and often undermine the nutritional, financial, and operational integrity of the NSLP and SBP.

Food and beverages are not the only competing factors in the school day. There is also competition for students' time. With increased emphasis on in-class time, the amount of time students have for breakfast and lunch is shrinking. The average time for breakfast is 12 minutes and for lunch it is only 17 minutes. When pressed, students turn to vending machines for breakfast and lunch, even when healthful foods and beverages are available in the school meals program.

When students consistently replace healthy reimbursable school meals with less nutritious foods and beverages, such as *a la carte*, vending, or other meal/snack options, there is a risk their diets will lack key nutrients needed for optimal growth and academic performance. Likewise, when competitive foods are purchased in large quantities, there is likelihood of over-consumption and the potential for unhealthy weight gain.

Concerns about the soaring rates of childhood obesity have drawn attention to the importance of healthy school meals and snacks. In 2005, the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA) enacted legislation to require the State Board of Education (SBE) to adopt nutrition standards for all meals and snacks served in public schools. Shortly thereafter, the SBE adopted nutrition standards for foods and beverages in elementary schools. Before the standards were adopted, they were tested in 124 elementary schools. The test of nutrition standards in elementary schools revealed their implementation would require an investment of \$20 million annually or approximately \$25 dollars per student per year. For two consecutive years, the SBE has placed funding for healthier school meals among their top five priorities in their budget request to the NCGA. Unfortunately, funds have not been appropriated to support healthier school meals in elementary schools. As a result, the mandatory requirement to implement the standards has been delayed until 2010.

Despite the lack of funding, Child Nutrition Administrators who are committed to restoring the guiding principle of "doing the right thing for children" to the Child Nutrition Program began to implement the SBE-adopted nutrition standards in elementary schools. They also gradually removed less healthful foods and beverages from middle and high schools. Sweetened beverages, cookies, desserts, salty snacks, and fried foods were among the items that were disappearing from *a la carte* menus. Currently, over 95% of elementary schools have successfully implemented the SBE-adopted nutrition standard even without the necessary financial support to do so.

Unfortunately, the cost of implementing nutrition standards in elementary schools, combined with the increased operating costs (including escalating food, fuel, labor, equipment, and indirect costs) has proven to be cost prohibitive. Currently, the

majority of school districts in the state are operating at a significant financial loss. In order to generate revenues to support the program, most districts have had no options but to include less healthful foods and beverages into their school meals programs. With no other funding sources, schools have to resort to selling foods and beverages that will generate revenues for the district. This means low-cost, high calorie foods and beverages like french fries, cookies, fruit punch, and other sweetened beverages are returning to North Carolina's school cafeterias. Once again, healthy school foods have taken a back seat to healthy school finances.

Despite this setback, many student advocates remain committed to the vision of an optimal school nutrition environment, an environment where students receive consistent, reliable information about healthful food and beverage choices and have the opportunity to use the information when making food and beverage selections; where school administrators, teachers, and support staff provide the same clear and consistent messages that reinforce healthy eating habits; where foods and beverages offered to students in the school meals program, in vending machines, in school stores, and at student events reflect and model these messages; where lessons in the classroom are reflected in food choices available in the dining room; and where school personnel are role models for healthy lifestyle behaviors, including the development of healthful eating habits.

I believe the vision can become the reality in North Carolina's public schools. But achieving the vision will require the following actions:

- Students, parents, educators, and community leaders must take an active role in supporting an optimal school nutrition environment.
- Adequate federal, state, and local funds must be provided to ensure the total school environment supports the availability of healthful foods and beverages for students.
- Nutrition standards must be established for all foods and beverages available on the school campus; those standards must be achievable, affordable, and appealing to a diverse student population.
- Students must have a designated meal period of sufficient length to enjoy eating healthy foods, and meal periods should be scheduled at reasonable times during the day.
- Behavior-focused nutrition education must be integrated into the curriculum from pre-K through grade 12 and teachers who provide nutrition education must have appropriate training to do so.
- Decisions regarding the sale and availability of foods and beverages on the school campus must be based on student health and well-being, not on making a profit.

Please consider embracing the vision for an optimal school nutrition environment in our public schools and becoming advocates for making the vision become a reality. I think you will agree it's the right thing to do for children. **NCMJ**

The Child Nutrition Services Section of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction administers the eighth largest Child Nutrition Program in the nation. Each day, school nutrition personnel in 115 school districts prepare and serve meals for nearly 1.4 million students, half of whom are economically disadvantaged

and qualify for free or reduced-price meals at schools. A healthy school lunch is available to all students every day; the majority of elementary and middle schools provide school breakfast and many elementary schools provide an after school snack for students.

REFERENCES

- 1 US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Agriculture. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* 2005. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office; 2005.

- 2 Public Law 79-396. Stat. 281, Sect. 2. National School Lunch Act (1946).

Eat Smart, Move More Health Tip



Enjoy More Fruits and Veggies

What are low in calories, full of essential nutrients and can help reduce your risk for chronic diseases? Fruits and vegetables! Make fruits and vegetables half your plate at every meal and for every snack. Fresh, frozen, dried, canned—it all counts. Shake things up by enjoying a variety of colors to stay healthy and fit. Your body will thank you.

For more tips on how to eat your fruits and veggies every day where you live, learn, earn, play and pray, visit

www.EatSmartMoveMoreNC.com

