



Benefits of School Meal Participation

School Meal Advantages

Healthy eating patterns during childhood affect eating patterns in later years [1]. Students who eat school lunches meeting requirements of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) consume more vegetables, drink more milk and fewer sweetened beverages, consume more grain mixtures, and eat fewer cookies, cakes and salty snacks than students who make other lunchtime choices [2]. Both the NSLP and the School Breakfast Program meet nutrition standards consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Advantages of school meal participation go beyond simple nutrient intake. Research shows that students who eat breakfast at school have increased standardized achievement test scores, improved attendance and reduced tardiness [3]. Other research shows that students who eat breakfast have improved academic, behavioral, and emotional functioning [4].

Over the last ten years, significant strides have been made in ensuring school meal patterns are consistent with expert dietary guidance. School lunches in the 1998-1999 school year had fewer calories from total fat and saturated fat and more calories from carbohydrate, compared to school lunches in the 1991-1992 school year. More specifically, 82% of elementary schools and 91% of secondary schools met the recommended goals for total fat calories and saturated fat calories [5].

However, fewer than 60% of students choose the NSLP lunch [2]. Food options beyond the school lunch and breakfast are available to students in many schools; these foods -- sold a la carte, in school stores, in snack bars or in vending machines -- do not currently have to meet any standards for nutritional quality.

Students are Flunking Healthy Eating

According to the USDA's *Team Nutrition Call to Action* [1], diets of children and teens are inadequate:

Only 2 percent of youth meet Food Guide Pyramid recommendations for all five major food groups; 16 percent do not meet any of the recommendations.

- Less than 15 percent of school children eat the recommended servings of fruit, less than 20 percent eat the recommended servings of vegetables, less than 25 percent eat the recommended servings of grains, and only 30 percent consume the recommended milk group servings on any given day.
- Only 16 percent of school children do not exceed the guideline for saturated fat on any given day.

- Teenagers today drink twice as much carbonated soda as milk, and fewer than one in five girls ages 9 to 19 meet the recommended intake of calcium.
- About 12 percent of students report skipping breakfast. Only 11 percent report eating a breakfast that contains foods from three food groups and food energy intakes greater than 25 percent of the Recommended Dietary Allowance. The likelihood of eating breakfast declines with the age of the student.

School Meal Participation Makes a Difference

According to the USDA Report to Congress [6], nutrition clearly has a major impact on children - on their health, their ability to learn, and their potential for becoming healthy and productive adults. School meals make an important contribution to the nutrition of school-aged children. The recently published School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-II indicates that reimbursable meals selected by students exceed the Recommended Dietary Allowances standard for key nutrients. According to a recently published USDA analysis of the 1994-1996 CSFII data [6]:

- National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participation is associated with higher average intakes of many nutrients and over 24 hours.
- NSLP participants have substantially lower intakes of added sugars than do non-participants.
- NSLP participants are more likely than non-participants to consume vegetables, milk and milk products, and meat and other protein-rich foods, both at lunch and over 24 hours; they also consume less soda and/or fruit drinks.
- School Breakfast Program participation is associated with higher intakes of food energy, calcium, phosphorous, and vitamin C.

**For more information on school meal participation, visit
the USDA Food and Nutrition Services website at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn>
and the American School Food Service Association website at <http://www.asfsa.org>.**

References

[1] United States Department of Agriculture, *Team Nutrition Call to Action: Healthy School Nutrition Environments*, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn>. [2] Burghardt J, Devaney B. eds. "The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study," *Am J Clin Nut.* 1995; 61 (suppl): 213s-220s. [3] Meyers AF, Sampson AE, Weitzman M, Rogers BL, Kayne G. "School Breakfast Program and Performance," *Am J Dis Child.* 1989; 143: 1234-1239. [4] Murphy JM, Pagano ME, Nachmani J, Sperling P, Kane S, Lkeinman RE. "The Relationship of School Breakfast to Psychosocial and Academic Functioning," *Arch of Pediatrics and Adoles Med.* 1988; 152: 899-906. [5] Fox MK, Crepinsek M, Connor P, Battaglia M. School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-II: Summary of Findings. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/MENU/Published/CNP/FILES/SNDAlIfind.pdf>. Accessed January 22, 2002. [6] USDA Report to Congress: Foods Sold in Competition with USDA Meal Programs, Jan. 12, 2002.