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Are School Meals Good for Kids? In the past several years the media, numerous studies and policymakers at the federal and state levels have focused on the growing rates of obesity and overweight among children in America. Child nutrition professionals, including the 55,000 members of the School Nutrition Association (formerly the American School Food Service Association) have continued to work with students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members to develop healthy school environments that include consistent messages on healthy eating choices, nutrition education and physical activity. This sheet speaks to the high quality and nutritional value of school meals and their role in promoting healthy eating behaviors in young people.

Background: Childhood Obesity and Overweight

Reaching Epidemic Proportions. Childhood obesity and overweight are major health concerns to all in the child nutrition arena. The percent of children who are overweight (defined by the U.S. government as having a Body Mass Index-for-age at or above the 95th percentile of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Growth Charts) continues to increase. Among children and teens ages 6-19, 15 percent (approximately 9 million) are overweight according to the 1999-2000 data, or triple the proportion in 1980.¹

Affecting Diverse Populations. Non-Hispanic black and Mexican-American adolescents ages 12-19 were more likely to be overweight (24 percent) than non-Hispanic white adolescents (13 percent).²

Related Factors. Childhood obesity is the leading cause of pediatric hypertension, and is associated with Type II diabetes mellitus. It increases the risk of coronary heart disease, increases stress on the weight-bearing joints, lowers self-esteem and affects relationships with peers.³

The Role of School Meals: Part of the Solution

Governed by Federal Guidelines. Meals served under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) must meet federal guidelines based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. No more than 30 percent of calories can come from fat and less than 10 percent from saturated fat. School lunches provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories. These guidelines apply over the course of one week of school lunch menus.

Meeting Nutrition Standards. The 2001 School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment II (SNDA II) study based on research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture during the 1998-1999 school year found that students in 91 percent of secondary schools and 82 percent of elementary schools had the opportunity to select lunches that were consistent with dietary standards for fat and saturated fat.⁴

School Meals vs. Bag Lunch. Research by Dr. Alice Jo Rainville of Eastern Michigan University concluded that students who eat school lunches consume 29% less calories from fat and that school lunches contain three times as many dairy products, twice as much fruit and seven times the vegetable amounts as lunches brought from home.⁵





33 Million Healthy Meals Make a Difference

Combating Obesity. A recent study in the August 2003 issue of *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* concluded that “girls in food insecure households had significantly reduced odds of being at risk of overweight if they participated in the [National School Lunch, School Breakfast and Food Stamp Programs].” The research highlights the importance of food assistance programs to low-income children not only in addressing hunger “but also in potentially protecting them from excess weight gain.”⁶

Improving Academic Performance. Research conducted by Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School found that school breakfasts resulted in significant increases in math grades and decreases in student absences and tardiness.⁷

No Super-Sizing. The meals served as part of the NSLP are provided in age-appropriate serving sizes – making the school lunch room one of the foodservice establishments in the United States where super-sizing is not an option.

Local Control, State Oversight. State and federal reviews are conducted to ensure schools are meeting the federal requirements, including nutrition standards. Child nutrition professionals at local school foodservice departments make decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared. Cultural and regional preferences play a role in determining the foods, as do student preference.

Fruits and Veggies Abound. According to the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment II, roughly two-thirds of all school lunch menus offer more than the required two fruit and vegetable choices set by USDA regulations.⁸ The 2003 *School Foodservice and Nutrition Operations Survey* conducted by SNA found that fresh fruits and vegetables are offered daily in 85% of high schools.⁹

By the Numbers

- 28 million school lunches and 8.1 million school breakfasts are served each school day (FY 2002.)
- Over 6 billion school meals served annually.
- Over 99,500 schools and child care facilities participated in the National School Lunch program in 2002.
- In 2002 the average cost for a school lunch (for those not eligible for free or reduced meals) was \$1.57.

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¹ *Prevalence of Overweight Among Children and Adolescents: United States, 1999-2000, National Center for Health Statistics*

² *Ibid.*

³ Goran M. *Childhood Obesity and Health Risk. Proceedings from Twenty-Seventh Annual Texas Human Nutrition Conference “Obesity: Weighing the Facts.” February 4, 2000, Texas A&M University.*

⁴ US Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment II, April 2001.*

⁵ Rainville, A. *Nutritional Quality of Reimbursable School Lunches Compared to Lunches Brought From Home, The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management, Spring 2001.*

⁶ Jones et al. *Lower Risk of Overweight in School-aged Food Insecure Girls Who Participate in Food Assistance, Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, August 2003.*

⁷ Murphy J. *The Relationship of School Breakfast to Psychosocial and Academic Functioning, Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, vol. 142 no. 9 1998.*

⁸ US Department of Agriculture. *School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment II, April 2001.*

⁹ School Nutrition Association, *2003 School Foodservice and Nutrition Operations Survey, March 2003.*