



Fueling student success through healthier school nutrition

Across the country, K-12 schools and universities are placing greater emphasis on healthier eating—because what students eat can significantly impact how they learn, grow and succeed. Nutrition plays a powerful role in academic performance and long-term well-being. A balanced diet may improve cognitive function in students, providing schools the opportunity to address barriers to nutrition.¹ When students have access to nutritious meals and snacks throughout the school day, they are more likely to stay focused, retain information and remain engaged in the classroom.

Children and adolescents go through critical phases of physical and cognitive development. Nutrient-rich diets help support rapid growth in muscles, bones and superior brain function.² Balanced meals that contain combinations of protein, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains may help students concentrate better and feel more energized throughout the day. On the other hand, poor nutrition can lead to decreased alertness, low energy and challenges in learning, which may ultimately affect academic outcomes.

Students can have difficulty concentrating when they do not receive adequate nutrients which can increase fatigue, which may result in poor testing scores and a decrease in participation. Schools have a unique opportunity to address these challenges by helping students receive the nourishment they need during the school day. By providing healthier food choices, offering nutrition education, and promoting an overall culture of wellness, schools can help set students up for success—both academically and personally.

Shaping Habits

School nutrition programs are about more than just food—they help instill thoughtful eating habits. Today's school menus are evolving to reflect better choices, offering healthier versions of familiar favorites like whole wheat pizza crusts, baked sweet potato fries, fresh produce and low-fat milk. This introduction of whole foods can help form eating habits to help improve long-term health outcomes and help decrease the risk of some illnesses. Programs that introduce healthier foods to students diets have been shown to reduce obesity.³

Some school districts, like Los Angeles Unified, have taken strong steps to reduce added sugars by banning flavored milks entirely.⁴ Others have focused on transparency by introducing clearer food labeling that

helps students make informed choices based on calorie content and nutritional value. Nutrition label education and transparency helps improve health and nutrition literacy, helping to encourage healthier eating choices.⁵





In addition to changing what's served in the cafeteria, schools are also incorporating nutrition education into the classroom. Hands-on learning experiences like cooking classes, school gardens and farm visits help students understand the real-life impact of food choices on their health, energy and performance—creating deeper engagement and awareness. This active learning experience empowers students to gain practical skills and a personal connection to food and nutrition, ultimately allowing them to make the important, informed decisions about their diets to help lay the foundation for healthier habits.

Community Support and Funding

While many schools are eager to make these improvements, limited budgets and resources often present barriers to progress. That's where community partnerships and funding programs play an important role in supporting healthier school nutrition. Grants and resources from organizations like the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and nonprofits like Action for Healthy Kids provide schools with important support.^{6,7,8} These programs can help schools fund new kitchen equipment, provide

training for food service staff and introduce updated curriculum materials that include wellness and nutrition education.

Programs such as Farm to School also help schools connect with local farmers to bring fresh, seasonal produce to cafeterias.⁹ These initiatives not only help diversify menus and improve access to fresh foods while educating students on the importance of local farming, gardening, the value of sustainability, and the benefits of eating locally. These initiatives can improve student diets and bring students a connection to their community and to the food they eat.

These community-based efforts not only improve the nutritional quality of school meals but also help foster a sense of belonging and connection. When students see local farms represented in their lunch choices, or participate in growing vegetables in a school garden, they are more likely to appreciate healthier foods and feel more invested in their own nutrition.

Partnering for Impact

With students consuming up to half of their daily calories while at school, what they eat throughout the day can affect learning outcomes.¹⁰ That's why it's so important for schools to foster a supportive food environment—one that helps fuel learning, energy and development.

ODP Business Solutions® provides a diverse selection of options including fresh fruits and vegetables to help schools encourage healthier habits while creating an environment that helps support student well-being in the classroom and beyond.

Learn more about how
ODP Business Solutions can help
encourage healthy habits:
www.odpbusiness.com

¹ <https://biomedgrid.com/pdf/AJBSR.MS.ID.003013.pdf>
² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5746694/>
³ <https://news.yale.edu/2018/12/17/school-based-nutritional-programs-reduce-student-obesity>
⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-xpm-2011-jun-15-la-me-lausd-milk-20110615-story.html>
⁵ <https://www.mddpi.com/2072-6643/16/2/311>
⁶ <https://www.usda.gov/>
⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/index.html>
⁸ <https://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>
⁹ <https://www.farmtoschool.org/>
¹⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/school-nutrition/about/index.html#:~:text=Most%20U.S.%20children%20consume%20as,practices%20support%20healthy%20eating%20choices.>