



Action for Healthy Kids®

Progress or Promises?

What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools

The New Priority: Nutritional Quality

Improving school wellness isn't just a matter of shifting the emphasis off the least nutritious foods; it's about shifting the emphasis onto healthier foods. Limiting "junk food" is just a start. Schools must provide healthier foods that appeal to youth, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free milk and milk products.

About Action for Healthy Kids

Action for Healthy Kids® is a national nonprofit organization that addresses the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on improving nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in schools. This grassroots public-private partnership of 60 organizations and government agencies supports the efforts of Teams — comprised of more than 10,000 volunteers — in all states and the District of Columbia.

Action for Healthy Kids was founded in 2002 by former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, in response to the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, which identified the school environment as one of five key sites of change.

To learn more, visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

The situation.

- > Much of the attention and work over the last several years in school wellness has focused on reducing or eliminating "junk food," resulting in some important progress.
- > Much less attention has been given to the actual nutritional quality of foods and beverages provided to students.

The need to improve the "food environment."

- > When junk food is readily available, weight increases.
- > The food and nutrition environment includes school meals (breakfast and lunch) and all competitive foods — those available outside of school meals through class parties, a la carte, cafeteria sales, snack bars, school stores, vending machines, fund-raising efforts, and teacher rewards.
- > The U.S. Surgeon General, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the 2005 Dietary Guidelines all stress the need for schools to promote consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free milk and milk products.

- > A variety of strategies are needed to improve the school nutrition environment. Strategies include school meal improvements (such as whole wheat pizza crust) and the restriction of foods of low nutritional value.

Goals for nutritional quality.

Goals for nutritional quality in the school environment include:

- > All foods available before, during, or after school should be consistent with USDA standards in a manner that appeals to students and promotes an increase in participation in school meal programs.
- > Nutrition education and promotions should emphasize foods with nutrients missing in children's diets.
- > Foods in the school meal programs should be safe, have appealing packaging, be tasty, culturally diverse, and appealing to youth, and ensure high-quality meals.
- > Students must develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors to adopt, maintain, and enjoy healthy eating habits.



Overcoming barriers.

There are hurdles to overcome.

- > School meals include processed, prepared food items. Preparing higher quality, tasty, nutritious meals that would require more on-site production presents a need for training, higher skilled staff, and possibly new equipment.
- > Budgets for school food service are often inadequate for the rising costs of food and labor. Higher quality food products that are tasty and prepared and served in an appealing manner cost more than current alternatives.
- > A significant barrier to making better food choices at schools is often the poor quality and unappetizing nature of the options served, not their healthfulness.
- > Students and teachers have not always been receptive to improvements to school meals. School nutrition professionals have concerns that changes will negatively affect participation rates and budgets.
- > Nutrition and public health professionals feel the biggest barrier keeping youth from consuming nutrient-rich foods is their lack of interest in doing so, since the status quo is seen as no problem.
- > Other barriers include: the lack of access to tasty and appealing healthful food options; the lack of support from parents; and a school environment that's generally not conducive to healthy eating.

Making nutritional quality a priority.

To make nutritional quality a higher priority — to improve health and academic performance — schools should:

- > Motivate youth to make better food choices at school by improving access to quality, healthful foods that are tasty and appealing in school meals and in all other venues at school.
- > Engage youth in developing approaches for improving nutritional quality in their school.
- > Utilize social marketing strategies to promote and market all key food groups that youth need to consume more of—including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free milk and milk products.
- > Encourage participation in school meal programs through the use of taste tests, special menus, improved food choices, and incentives and contests.
- > Partner with school administrators and industry to provide the funding necessary for improvements.
- > Engage parents, families, communities, students, and schools in activities and events focusing on wellness at home and school.

For further information.

More information on nutritional quality and the current state of school wellness is available in the new Action for Healthy Kids report, *Progress or Promises? What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools*. A free downloadable copy is available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.