



PTA-School Partnerships
Can Encourage

Better School Nutrition

by Janey Thornton

Since its inception 60 years ago, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) has provided nutritionally balanced meals to children in schools. Originally developed as a national security measure to ensure that young men had the proper nourishment to serve as soldiers, school meals continue to play a critical role in helping students become and remain healthy and mentally alert. School lunches, and breakfasts, too, are prepared in accordance with federal nutrition standards that were established to promote a healthy childhood weight. School meals offer students the fuel they need to succeed in academics, sports, and other activities.

While the components of a school meal add up to a healthy balance, students are not compelled to take or consume specific items. In addition, nutritious school lunches are frequently undermined by unhealthy foods and beverages available outside of the NSLP. These “competitive” foods can be found in many schools—in vending machines, school stores, classrooms, and even cafeterias—and can hinder school efforts to promote good nutrition.

It’s critical for parents and teachers to take an active role in working with nutritionists and others in the school community to develop healthy school environments that will contribute to life-long healthy eating habits. Where should you begin? The first step is to learn more about the national school meal programs, as well as the features and standards of your school’s food services.

School meals and proper nutrition

When the National School Lunch Act was signed into law by President Harry Truman on June 4, 1946, Truman remarked, “No nation is any healthier than its children.” In a later speech on the same subject, Truman said, “The well-nourished school child is a better student. He is healthier and more alert. He is developing good food habits that will benefit him for the rest of his life. In short, he is a better asset for his country in every way.” For 60 years, that spirit has guided the NSLP and, for 40 years, the School Breakfast Program (SBP).

Every school day, more than 8 million school breakfasts and 28 million school lunches are served to American children attending public and nonprofit private schools. Provided through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's NSLP and SBP, these nutritious, balanced meals are provided in age-appropriate serving sizes. They meet federal nutrition requirements that are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (published jointly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture). The meals contain limited calories from fat and saturated fat while providing the fruits, vegetables, dairy, protein, and grains that children require to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Research has found that the NSLP provides children with twice the servings of fruits and vegetables and greater amounts of grains and dairy than is received by children who eat lunches brought from home or who leave school to purchase lunches or snacks. Since an estimated 98 percent of U.S. elementary schools participate in the NSLP, it's likely that *your* school is guided by the requirements of the program.

When was the last time you visited your school cafeteria? If it has been more than a few months, it has been too long! You likely have not seen many of the improvements that are being made in today's cafeterias. For example, in many schools and districts, cafeteria meals include entrée salads, shaker salads served in lidded plastic cups, and salad bars; yogurt parfaits and multigrain rolls; and reduced-fat versions of traditional favorites, like pizza with low-fat cheese and whole-grain crust, and fries that are baked instead of fried. Cafeterias have also become a regular source for nutrition education, with signage, displays, newsletters, and websites that provide information on healthy eating; cafeteria staff have even become a resource for classroom projects on food and nutrition.

Too many of our children are not taking advantage of the low-cost, high-quality meals served through the NSLP and SBP, however, because other foods—often of low nutritional value—are increasingly available in schools. Furthermore, research results published in the December 2005 issue of the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* showed that higher body mass indexes (higher levels of body fat) in middle school students were associated with particular school policies. Those policies included using food as an incentive or reward and allowing students to snack frequently or consume high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages in the classroom.

Numerous PTAs and other child advocates are concerned about the unhealthful foods available in schools and are in search of effective strategies to address this problem. A recent federal law requires school districts participating in the NSLP to create local school wellness policies that address *all* foods available on the school campus, as well as nutrition education and physical activity. But the success of such policies depends on the leadership and dedication of parents, teachers, and administrators working together with school nutrition directors and managers.

Getting involved

An important step in achieving a school environment free from unhealthful foods is getting to know the school nutrition staff for your school and district. In most communities, the school nutrition program is supervised by a district director, who is responsible for planning menus, purchasing foods and beverages to be sold in the cafeteria, and keeping the program in compliance with regulations. A site manager is accountable for food preparation and service at each individual school. While it is rare that either the director or the manager has authority over school vending machines and other non-cafeteria food sales, you will probably find these staff members eager to work with you to identify healthy alternatives and to craft policies that send consistent messages about nutrition to students.

Start by inviting the school nutrition director and/or manager to attend your next PTA meeting. You can request that they give a formal presentation about the school meal program, or you can make it an opportunity for a simple meet and greet. The key is to establish a welcoming atmosphere that reflects your respect for the expertise of these school professionals and your understanding that everyone shares the same goal and responsibility to attain that goal.

There are other ways you can do your part to build stronger partnerships with the school nutrition team, too. Consider the following ideas:

- * Most school nutrition directors welcome individual meetings with concerned parents. Schedule an appointment, and be sure to write down your questions in advance.
- * Check with the food service manager and/or principal about visiting the school cafeteria during meal service.
- * Find out the status of your local school wellness policy. Districts were required to complete their policies by the beginning of this school year, but much assistance will be needed in implementing and supporting the new policies, as well as in evaluating their success and suggesting appropriate revisions. PTAs will be integral to this effort!

Healthy lifestyles, nutritious foods, and physical activity should be part of children's—and adults'—lives every day, throughout the day, not just during school hours on school days. A dynamic partnership between school nutrition professionals, parents, teachers, and kids can have positive results that last a lifetime. **OC**

Janey Thornton, SFNS, is the 2006–2007 president of the School Nutrition Association. She is a former PTA member and a school food service and nutrition specialist.