Nutrition Education & Promotion

Nutrition education is the process of teaching students how to choose and enjoy healthy foods along with the benefits that healthy foods have for one’s body and mind. Nutrition education and promotion can take place across the school, formally and informally, inside and outside of the classroom – in the cafeteria, all around the school and at school events.

How Can Advocates Support Nutrition Education and Promotion at School?

- Put up signs that promote healthy eating.
- Plan food tastings that give students the opportunity to try healthy foods – particularly when your school food service is willing to incorporate popular choices into the school menu. Offering taste tests of healthy school menu items helps to promote those items in the lunch line.
- Plan a fun and interactive family event around nutrition education. Take advantage of events like parent-teacher conferences, when you have a built-in audience, to provide healthy snacks and nutrition tips.
- Seek out nutrition experts in your community to provide lessons for students and families – registered dieticians and USDA or university extension staff are good resources.
- Plan a health fair. Bring in community partners to provide resources and different perspectives.
- Lead a student group dedicated to healthy eating and nutrition promotion.
- Write healthy-eating tips for the school newsletter or have the wellness team create its own newsletter or website that provides updates on team activities along with information on healthy living. Or distribute an existing newsletter, such as “Nibbles for Health” developed by USDA’s Team Nutrition (available at http://teammunrition.usda.gov/resources/nibbles.html).
- Find out what organizations in your community offer in terms of nutrition workshops, assemblies or events that they can bring to your school. Museums, health-care providers and gardening organizations are a great place to start.
- Search for free nutrition education curriculum online (there are plenty of options!) and share your favorite links with teachers. To start, try Fuel Up to Play 60’s “Little D’s Nutrition Expedition” (http://school.fueluptoplay60.com/tools/nutrition-education/lessons.php) and Kids’ Health (http://kidshealth.org/classroom/).

“Right there, in the middle of every school day, lies time and energy already devoted to the feeding of children. We have the power to turn that daily school lunch from an afterthought into a joyous education, a way of caring for our health, our environment and our community.”

— Alice Waters, Edible Schoolyard: A Universal Idea

How to Create a Healthier School Food Culture

Action for Healthy Kids®
Nutrition Education: School Gardens

Start a school garden
It’s very valuable for children (and adults) to gain hands-on experience learning about real, healthy food. Plus, kids are often more willing to try new foods when they grow the foods themselves. Garden to Cafeteria programs and Youth Farmers’ Markets make school gardening even more educational and sustainable.

- Find out about local resources in your area, such as a Slow Food chapter, an urban gardening or farming association, or a university cooperative extension service.

- Grants for school gardens are available from many sources. The National Gardening Association offers grant programs through different partners as do many other businesses, foundations and organizations like Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK). Visit the AFHK website to learn about current grant opportunities.

“One student claimed she didn’t like spinach, but after trying what we had grown in the garden claimed she could eat that spinach and it was very good...!”
– Amatist McChesney, AFHK school garden volunteer, Lamar Middle School, Austin, Texas

Farm to School Programs
Farm to School programs connect K-12 schools and local farms with the objectives of improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers. Visit the National Farm to School Network to learn more at http://www.farmtoschool.org.

A 2010 study of 238 middle school students showed that kids in schools offering cooking and gardening classes integrated with classroom curriculum scored higher on nutrition knowledge and showed stronger preferences for green, leafy vegetables. Younger students increased fruit and vegetable intake by nearly one and a half servings per day.¹

Resources for school gardens:
The Edible Schoolyard Project
http://edibleschoolyard.org/

National Gardening Association
http://www.kidsgardening.org/

How to Start a School Garden – A Toolkit
(Alliance for a Healthier Generation)

Slow Food USA
http://www.slowfoodusa.org/index.php/programs/
children and food_detail/resources1/

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www.ActionforHealthyKids.org

¹ http://edibleschoolyard.org/our-story
Healthy Food Fundraisers

- Fruit
- Smoothies
- Spices
- 100% juice
- Fruit and yogurt parfaits
- Trail mix, nuts, seeds, 100% fruit leather
- Healthy vending machines
- Cookbook of families’ healthy recipes
- Herb starts or kits
- Farmers’ markets

Active Fundraisers

- Fun walks or runs
- Walk-a-thons, bike-a-thons, jump-rope-a-thons, bowl-a-thons, skate-a-thons, hula-hoop-a-thons
- School dances
- Family obstacle course
- Golf or tennis tournaments
- Teacher-student competitions (volleyball, softball, Frisbee...)

Sample Profits from Healthier Fundraisers

- $1,000
  A school sells 1,440 water bottles with the names/logos of 5 local business sponsors
- $5,000
  A walk-a-thon with 100 student, parent, and family member walkers each raising $50 in sponsorships
- $9,000
  110 families buy scratch cards with discounts at local businesses (look for coupon books or cards that promote health-conscious businesses and services)
- $30,000/year
  100 school families belong to a grocery store Scrip program

Traditional Fundraisers often focus on selling low-nutrition foods and beverages, serving as prime marketing opportunities for big business and putting students’ health at jeopardy. One study found that every separate food-related practice (e.g., fundraiser) that promotes low-nutrition foods in a school is associated with a 10% increase in students’ body mass indexes (BMI).
Healthy Fundraising Ideas

Review the USDA’s national nutrition standards for fundraising foods sold on campus established to comply with the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Check your school’s wellness policy or school improvement plan to see if they contain any guidelines or goals about fundraisers. If they don’t, find out what it would take to add some.

Non-Food Fundraisers

| Gift wrap | Game night, bingo night |
| Water bottles | Auctions (live, silent, or online)* |
| Craft fairs | Candles, lotions, soaps |
| Garage sales | Greeting cards, stationary |
| Car washes | Plants, flowers, bulbs, seeds |
| Book fairs | Discount cards/coupon books* |
| Scratch cards* | Magazine subscriptions |
| Scrip programs* | Recycling (cell phones, printer cartridges) |
| Store reward programs* | School spirit apparel and merchandise |
| Rent a special parking spot |

*look for programs and auction items that promote health-conscious businesses and services

Resources

“Healthy Fundraising: Promoting a Healthy School Environment.” Connecticut State Department of Education

Alliance for a Healthier Generation – Healthy Fundraisers
https://schools.healthiergeneration.org/asset/1588vm/08-459_AlternativeFundraisingIdeas.pdf

Information on the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 and USDA regulations:

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1National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. “Sweet Deals: School Fundraisers can be Healthy and Profitable.”

Action for Healthy Kids®
Healthy Birthdays, Celebrations & Family Events

Birthdays, celebrations, and family events are great opportunities to promote a healthy lifestyle, provide consistent messages and create excitement around nutritious choices at school. Plan events that emphasize healthy foods and align with classroom lessons or shift the focus and plan non-food events centered on physical activity, music, art and games. Host events that make it easy for children to practice making healthy choices.

Birthdays — the birthday child can:
- Be the teacher’s helper.
- Wear a special crown, sash, button or badge all day.
- Donate and/or read a favorite book to the class.
- Choose the class music for writing or independent study time.
- Receive a personalized birthday card from the teacher via email or snail mail.
- Choose a game or activity the class does for the last few minutes of the school day.
- Have special time (for a walk, game or other activity) with the teacher, principal or another adult.
- Receive a “Celebrate Me” book from classmates with written stories, poems or drawings about the birthday child.

Children like adventure – don’t be afraid to try something new!

Promote Healthy Living
Plan family events that get parents engaged and on board with healthy living, as this will create more buy-in and support for a healthy school food culture. It also makes it more likely that healthy habits will be reinforced at home.

For a list of healthy school food ideas for snacks, celebrations and family events visit:
www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/ParentToolkit-FoodIdeas

Family Events
- Health fairs
- School garden work days
- Cooking lessons or “Iron Chef” competitions
- Physical activity events with healthy snacks or prizes (dance contests, fun runs, obstacle courses, bike-a-thons, sock hops)
- Screenings of movies that promote healthy living
- Nutrition classes for the family from community partners like your cooperative university extension service
- Fall festival with active fall-themed games and a farmers’ market
- Walk-to-school month with parent participation
- Creation of school teams for local runs or walks
- Parents and teachers vs. kids sports competition
- 30-day challenges – pick a healthy habit and organize a competition around it, starting with a kick-off event and ending with a celebration
Healthy Celebrations

Celebrations

- Give children extra recess time instead of a party.
- Have a dance party. Let students select the music. Invite the principal and other school staff!
- Get students involved in planning and preparing for celebrations—let them make decorations and favors and let them choose the games.
- Create a book honoring what is being celebrated that day. Have students draw pictures showing what the day means to them.
- Organize a special community service project instead of a party. Invite senior citizens in for lunch, collect goods and make cards for sheltered families, organize a project outside for Earth Day.
- Have students vote on a special class art project or craft. Invite a local artist to come in and do a demonstration.
- Arrange a treasure hunt around the classroom. Provide a special non-food treat at the end. Use a theme that ties into what the kids are learning in class.
- Ask students to come up with healthy party ideas, and ask parents to send in healthy recipes and ideas for activities, games, and crafts. Create a “healthy classroom party guide” to distribute to parents.
- Plan around holiday themes. Students can make cards for winter holidays, decorate the classroom with hearts for Valentine’s Day, and learn an Irish step-dance for St. Patrick’s Day. Search education websites for ideas.

Resources
Coalition for Activity and Nutrition to Defeat Obesity (CanDo) & Healthy Kids Club Guide to Healthy School Celebrations:
www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/HealthyPartyGuide-CanDo

When food is offered

- Make good nutrition the expectation and the easy choice—offer fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low fat/fat-free dairy products and water.
- Check your school’s wellness policy or school improvement plan to see if they contain any guidelines or goals about foods for birthdays, celebrations, and family events. If they don’t, find out what it would take to address this issue.

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Healthy Non-Food Rewards

Rewards happen at many levels across a school. Teachers, administrators and parent groups offer rewards to recognize and celebrate student accomplishments. The goal of rewarding students is to help them internalize desirable behaviors and create motivation for learning that comes from inside. The most effective rewards fit naturally into the context and mission of the school community and should promote healthy living as a desired value of the community. Non-material rewards involving recognition, privileges and opportunities for physical activity or other types of enrichment are powerful ways to help meet these goals. Material rewards such as school supplies, trinkets, toys, and gift certificates can be donated by parents or provided by parent-teacher organizations for use on a more limited basis.

Elementary School Students

- Make deliveries to office
- Fun movie
- Teach class
- Be a helper in another classroom
- Read morning announcements
- Sit with friends
- Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- Play a favorite game or do puzzles
- Extra recess time
- Show and tell
- Free time at the end of class
- Dance to music in the classroom
- Gift certificate to school store (non-food items)
- Walk with the principal or teacher
- Fun physical activity break
- Teacher or volunteer reads special book to class
- Certificate, trophy, ribbon, plaque
- Listen to music or a book on audiotape
- Read outdoors or have class outdoors
- Extra art, music or reading time
- Teacher performs special skill, e.g., singing, guitar playing, juggling
- Earn points or play money to spend on privileges or non-food items
- Commendation certificate or letter sent home to parents by teacher or principal
- Trip to treasure box filled with nonfood items, e.g., stickers, pencils, erasers, bookmarks, school supplies
- Access to items that can only be used on special occasions, e.g., special art supplies, games, or toys

Brave teachers have even been known to offer rewards like kissing a frog or letting students cut their hair!

Recognition in itself is a huge reward.
Consider recognizing students during morning announcements, at a school assembly, on a photo recognition board, or on the school's website. Most kids enjoy hearing their successes acknowledged in front of their peers. Don't underestimate the power of small, personalized efforts such as a phone call or email to the students’ parents, a hand-written note commending the achievement, or a certificate of recognition.

Middle School Students

- Sit with friends
- Choose partners for activities
- Listen to music while working at desk
- Reduced homework or “no homework” pass
- Extra credit
- Fun movie
- Brainteaser puzzles, group activities and games
- Earn points or play money for privileges or non-food items
- Computer time
- Free choice time or chat break at end of class
- Assemblies
- Field trips
- Eat lunch outside or have class outside
Healthy Non-Food Rewards

High School Students
- Extra credit
- Fun movie
- Reduced homework
- Late homework pass
- Donated coupons for music, movies or books
- Drawings for donated prizes
- Pep rally
- Recognition on morning announcements
- Tickets to school events, e.g., dances, sporting events

PTO/PTA Rewards
- Water bottles
- School-branded apparel
- Movie passes
- Special time with a teacher
- Dance Dance Revolution, Wii or video game party
- Pool party, hike, or group trip to a kids’ fun place
- Raffle for bigger prizes, such as a bike, an iPod or a ride in a limo

Food Rewards
Food Rewards contradict classroom lessons on nutrition, add empty calories to kids’ diets and teach kids to eat when they’re not hungry – setting the stage for unhealthy habits that can last a lifetime and contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic sweeping the country. One study found that every separate food-related practice (e.g., a food incentive or reward) that promotes low-nutrition foods in a school is associated with a 10% increase in students’ body mass indexes (BMI).

Check your school’s wellness policy or school improvement plan to see if they contain any guidelines or goals about healthy, non-food rewards. If they don’t, find out what it would take to address this topic.

"Rewarding children with unhealthy foods in school undermines our efforts to teach them about good nutrition. It’s like teaching children a lesson on the importance of not smoking, and then handing out ashtrays and lighters to the kids who did the best job listening.”

— Marlene Schwartz, PhD, Co-Director Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University

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1 Adapted from “Effective and Healthy Rewards for Kids,” Coalition on Children and Weight San Diego and “Alternatives to Food Rewards,” Connecticut State Department of Education, May 2005 (Revised November 2011).