

Serving Up School Meals that Make the Grade

The National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program provide federally subsidized meals to tens of millions of children across the country every school day.¹

But consider the following:

- the nutrition standards for school meals have not been updated in more than 15 years;
- for many children, school meals are their primary source of food; and
- poor nutrition can lead to outcomes such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

The simple truth is that it's time to update school meal standards to reflect what we know today: eating more fruits, vegetables and whole grains is an important part of a healthy diet.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers school meal programs, asked the Institute of Medicine (see box) to develop recommendations that guide school food services to better meet the nutritional needs of children, foster healthy eating habits and safeguard children's health.³

The IOM released its school meals recommendations in an October 2009 report,⁴ entitled *School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children*, which include:

- increasing the amount and variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat and nonfat dairy products;
- reducing saturated fat and sodium; and
- requiring minimum and maximum calorie levels.



What is the Institute of Medicine?

The Institute of Medicine (IOM), an independent, nonprofit organization, is the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences. The IOM seeks to provide unbiased and authoritative advice to decision makers and the public.²



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



THE
PEW
CHARITABLE TRUSTS

Comparison of Current Requirements and New Recommendations for School Meals

Meal	Food/Beverage	Current USDA Requirements	IOM Recommendations*
Breakfast	Fruit	½ cup fruit per day	1 cup fruit per day
Lunch	Fruit and Vegetables	½–1 cup fruit and vegetables considered together as one group	¾–1 cup of vegetables plus ½–1 cup fruit per day
Lunch	Vegetables	No specifications on types of vegetables	Weekly requirements for dark green and orange vegetables and legumes; limits on starchy vegetables
Breakfast and Lunch	Whole Grains	No requirement for whole grains	At least half of grains must be rich in whole grains
Breakfast and Lunch	Milk	1 cup, whole, reduced-fat, low-fat or nonfat milks (plain or flavored)	1 cup, fat-free (plain or flavored) or plain low-fat milk

* The IOM has also recommended nutrition standards for school foods that are sold outside the federally reimbursed school meal programs. Known as “competitive foods,” these include foods sold in school à la carte lines or in vending machines. Standards for competitive foods have not been updated in over 30 years. Similar to its recommendations for school meals, the IOM encourages the competitive food category to include wider availability of fruits, vegetables and whole grain-rich products.

IMPROVING SCHOOL FOODS

Childhood obesity rates in the United States have risen rapidly over the last four decades.⁵ Today, approximately 23 million children and adolescents in the United States—nearly one in three children—are either overweight or obese, which places them at increased risk for serious diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer and stroke.⁶ The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs feed tens of millions of children at least one meal each day, positioning schools to have a large, positive impact on the health of their students. Improving the standards for school meals will help more kids get the nutrients they need to grow, learn and succeed.

Together, we can help schools make the grade. Learn more at www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org.

The Kids’ Safe and Healthful Foods Project provides nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations on policies that impact the safety and healthfulness of school foods. Learn more at www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org.

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, “National Annual Summary of Food and Nutrition Service Programs (data as of Aug 3, 2010),” www.fns.usda.gov/pd/annual.htm (accessed Aug 24, 2010).

² Institute of Medicine, “About the IOM,” National Academies of Science, www.iom.edu/About-IOM.aspx (accessed Oct 21, 2010).

³ Institute of Medicine, *School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children*, (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2009).

⁴ Institute of Medicine, *School Meals*.

⁵ Cynthia L. Ogden et al., “Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in U.S. Children and Adolescents, 2007–2008,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 303, no. 3 (2010): 242–249.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Overweight and Obesity: Health Consequences,” www.cdc.gov/obesity/causes/health.html (accessed Feb 3, 2011).