

Making the Grade

Chicago Public Schools Aim for High Scores on Healthy Meals



The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are working together on the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project to provide nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations to help ensure that:

- USDA adopts science-based nutrition standards for all foods and beverages served and sold in schools;
- Schools have the resources they need to train cafeteria employees and replace outdated and broken kitchen equipment; and
- USDA develops and implements rigorous school food safety policies.

Kids deserve safe, healthy meals to help them grow, learn and succeed. Together we can help school foods make the grade.

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Executive Summary

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) represents the third-largest school district in the country, serving 400,000 students in more than 600 schools. In an effort to improve the quality of foods served in its schools, CPS debuted new breakfast and lunch menus in the 2010-2011 school year that exceed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) *HealthierUS School Challenge* Gold standards, distinguishing them as being among the healthiest in the country.*

Moving to more nutritious meal standards on a tight budget was a challenge. The effort began in 2004 with the involvement of the school district, community groups, parents and students. The healthier menus reflect many of the recommendations from the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the health arm of the National Academy of Sciences, including more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat milk, and less sodium and unhealthy fat. CPS's investment in new equipment and improved training for its food service staff was critical to the success of this program. The school system eliminated the use of deep-fat fryers in schools, expanded the number of salad bars in cafeterias, started a program to purchase more local fruits and vegetables, and ran hands-on culinary training sessions to help food service workers prepare new recipe-based menu items.

Pennies per meal matter, and CPS has managed to devise a cost-neutral approach for improving food quality for all students. The school system and its food service provider continue to closely monitor how well students are accepting new menu changes throughout the first year. Initial results have been mixed—a common experience for districts when first setting out to improve nutrition standards. Specifically, overall participation rates in Chicago schools remain well above the national average,¹ but lunch participation has slightly declined while breakfast participation has increased. Many districts across the country experienced an initial dip in participation after updating nutrition standards, but they have subsequently recovered to report sustained and cost-effective success.^{2,3,4}

* The HealthierUS School Challenge is USDA's voluntary national award program started in 2004 to recognize the accomplishments of schools that improve food quality and provide nutrition education and physical activity to students. To date, nearly 1,000 schools from 41 states have been recognized by this program.





Introduction

Each school day, more than 31 million children eat at least one meal provided through the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Programs. Most of these meals—59 percent and 80 percent, respectively—are served free or at a reduced price to children from low-income families, who often depend on school meals as a primary source of food.^{5,6} Indeed, school meals can account for over half of students' daily calories, and because children from low-income families are at highest risk for obesity—and consequently, serious health problems like type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke—schools play an important role in improving children's health.⁷

Many cities and states around the country have pioneered school food programs that offer healthier meals and snacks, and CPS has been one of the leaders in this effort. In this case study, the Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project—an initiative launched by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation—chronicles CPS's experience to show how changes in school food policies can affordably deliver healthy food to the nation's children.

The Chicago Story

As a large urban school district, CPS serves more than 70 million meals each year. Eighty-three percent of Chicago students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Over the past seven years, the school district has improved students' access to healthy food by addressing the meals served in the school cafeteria and the snacks offered in vending machines, à la carte cafeteria lines and school stores.

Prior to the 2010-2011 menu changes, CPS meals followed the existing USDA nutrition standards, which were based on the 1995 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and allowed schools to serve items such as nachos, donuts, pizza and burgers. The district's new menus now feature healthier offerings such as vegetable egg skillet with apples and nonfat milk for breakfast and chicken parmesan with brown rice for lunch. CPS has sought student buy-in through a marketing approach that includes student taste tests of new menu items and revamped food presentation in cafeteria lines. Current favorites among students are whole-grain cheese pizza, BBQ chicken sandwiches on

whole wheat buns and whole-grain spaghetti with meatballs.

Redesigning a menu for hundreds of thousands of students each school day within the confines of a tight budget is a monumental task. Community involvement, strong school wellness policies and commitment to pilot programs have all been important elements in the district's success. Key changes over the past seven years paved the way for current activities like maximizing bulk food purchases, increasing participation in breakfast and lunch programs, updating school kitchen equipment and training dining staff.

TABLE 1 What's on the Menu?

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
<p>BREAKFAST</p> <p>Kellogg's Raisin Bran</p> <p>Light Mozzarella String Cheese</p> <p>Pear</p> <p>Low-fat or Nonfat Milk</p>	<p>BREAKFAST</p> <p>Egg & Potato Breakfast Bowl</p> <p>100% Apple Juice</p> <p>Low-fat or Nonfat Milk</p>	<p>BREAKFAST</p> <p>Country Chicken Breakfast Sandwich</p> <p>Banana</p> <p>Low-fat or Nonfat Milk</p>	<p>BREAKFAST</p> <p>Kellogg's Kashi Heart-to-Heart</p> <p>Whole-Grain Mini-Muffin</p> <p>100% Orange Juice</p> <p>Low-fat or Nonfat Milk</p>	<p>BREAKFAST</p> <p>Vegetable Egg Skillet</p> <p>Apple</p> <p>Low-fat or Nonfat Milk</p>
<p>LUNCH</p> <p>Mandarin Chicken Salad</p> <p>Whole Wheat Roll</p> <p>Vegetarian Baked Beans</p> <p>Assorted Fresh Fruit and Cupped Fruit</p>	<p>LUNCH</p> <p>Chicken Parmesan with Brown Rice</p> <p>Frozen Local Green Beans</p> <p>Assorted Fresh Fruit and Cupped Fruit</p>	<p>LUNCH</p> <p>Antipasto Whole Wheat Pasta</p> <p>Salad with Veggies, Turkey, Ham and Cheese</p> <p>Seasoned Frozen Local Corn and Carrots</p> <p>Assorted Fresh Fruit and Cupped Fruit</p>	<p>LUNCH</p> <p>Sloppy Joe on a Whole Wheat Bun</p> <p>Sweet Potato Casserole</p> <p>Assorted Fresh Fruit and Cupped Fruit</p>	<p>LUNCH</p> <p>Whole Wheat Cheese Pizza (meatless)</p> <p>Tossed Romaine Salad</p> <p>Assorted Fresh Fruit and Cupped Fruit</p>

October 2010 Chicago Public Schools Lunch Menu

A Lesson Plan for Better Nutrition

“We want to instill in the next generation the need for healthy eating.”

—Rochelle Davis, executive director of the Healthy Schools Campaign

Innovation in Chicago Schools

The CPS story started with growing interest from school administrators and community members to transform the food served and sold in schools as part of a broader effort to improve children’s health through nutrition and exercise. With the support of parents, educators, government, nonprofit groups and businesses, advocates developed pilot

programs for a few local schools. As pilot projects began to show success, broader adoption spread throughout schools in the district. Charter schools such as the Academy for Global Citizenship (see Case Study 1) were among important early adopters of pilot programs and continue to create solutions that can then be applied in schools throughout the district.

CASE STUDY 1 Chicago’s Learning Lab: Academy for Global Citizenship

The Academy for Global Citizenship (AGC) is a public charter school in southwest Chicago that serves as an official “learning laboratory” for the district. A leader in providing nutritious, well-balanced meals cooked from scratch, AGC was the first school in the Midwest to earn USDA’s *HealthierUS School Challenge* Gold Award of Distinction.

Nearly all of AGC’s 200 students—three-quarters of whom come from low-income households—eat breakfasts and lunches served by the school. Breakfast items include fresh berry quinoa and seasonal veggie frittatas, while lunch features options such as hummus veggie sandwiches and whole-grain spaghetti with turkey marinara and kale crisps.

AGC contracts the management of food services through the district’s primary food service provider, Chartwells-Thompson Hospitality; however, the school also engages with farmers in the region as part of student farming and curricular activities. Nutrition education and school menu planning are cultivated together to create a holistic experience that encourages students to develop healthy, well-balanced lifestyles. AGC has also made organic foods a component of their healthy meals program. The added cost of purchasing organic foods has been offset through private fundraising, a strategy used by AGC to find supplemental funding since it first opened its doors.

Community Involvement

“It changed the way I eat a lot ... now I eat vegetables with my food, or whenever I make something, I include vegetables or I include a healthier substitute.”

—Elyssa, *Cooking up Change* winning team member⁸

The Chicago-based nonprofit Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) has played a key role in organizing community partners to revitalize school meals and physical activity programs in the city’s public schools. With the goal of improving local policies, HSC leveraged community interest to build relationships with parents, school administrators and businesses. Today, HSC works with more than 1,000 Chicago parents from more than 50 schools in underserved communities on the city’s south and west sides to champion the school wellness policies that are often the starting point for making school meals healthier.

To fast track school-based changes, HSC has started working with principals on the implementation of CPS’s wellness policy recommendations for healthy food standards, physical activity programs and nutrition education. This year, HSC hosted breakfasts with principals and their students to introduce them to the *HealthierUS School Challenge*. HSC provides support for local schools that sign up, including model school programming and administrative help for filling out the paperwork.

In addition, HSC works with local groups and citizens to support original approaches to bringing healthy foods to schools. For example, HSC coordinated a “Chef in the Classroom” day by recruiting local chefs to educate students about the importance of healthy eating. HSC has also engaged high school students to raise community awareness about preparing healthy school meals on a tight budget through its annual *Cooking up Change*TM contest (see Case Study 2), which has gained national attention for its positive impact.

Strong Wellness Policies

In August 2006, as mandated by federal law, CPS established a wellness policy on nutrition and physical activity that was based on the recommendations from the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. The district also formally implemented a snack-vending policy that banned such machines

CASE STUDY 2 Chicago’s Learning Lab: *Cooking up Change*TM

The Healthy Schools Campaign holds the annual culinary competition *Cooking up Change*, in which teams of high school students create healthy menus using the same ingredients and budget as that of their schools. A chef mentors each team in the planning and preparation of healthy dishes that are later judged at a fundraising cook-off.

Some of the student dishes have been incorporated into CPS’s lunch menu, and in 2009 the winning team earned a trip to Washington, DC, to participate in a press conference where they had the opportunity to cook with White House Chef Sam Kass.

in elementary and middle schools and set nutrition criteria for the snack foods offered in high schools.

In 2009, the school district convened a working group to craft an informed vision for updated standards that would exceed the existing federal school meal regulations set by USDA. Dietitians, food service operators and community partners came together around the goal of moving school meal standards closer to the 2009 expert recommendations from the IOM, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and *HealthierUS School Challenge* standards. The resulting meal policies incorporate major components of the IOM recommendations, such as increasing the amount and variety of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. In addition, the use of deep-fat fryers was eliminated, and menus were created that reduce sodium and contain zero trans fats (see Table 2).

Purchasing Power

School meal programs across the country operate on a tight budget. On average, they spend about \$1.25 on food for each lunch served.⁹ CPS knew it would have to find creative options in purchasing the nutritious food necessary to meet its new standards. Its sizable market power as one of the largest school districts in the country provided the leverage needed for vendors to offer favorable rates and change their recipes. After the district released a request for proposals seeking food service providers to meet its new specifications, a cost-neutral bid by Chartwells-Thompson Hospitality won the primary contract.

Bringing in Local Produce—The district placed an emphasis on buying locally grown

and processed fruits and vegetables, in order to improve freshness and taste of the produce being served in the schools while also supporting the local economy. The pilot farm-to-school program that began in 2007 with an initial \$10,000 total investment has grown to a \$2.3 million operation in the 2010-2011 school year. The district’s primary food service provider works with regional food distributors to purchase local fruits and vegetables. Michigan apples, peaches and blueberries are some of the most popular items with students.

A key element of the farm-to-school program is the coordinators who work with farmers to ensure the food is safe, of consistent quality, and packaged and delivered in a standardized way across all of the district’s schools. This process allows school food workers to create the same healthy menus in each school, regardless of the source farm.

Updating Recipes and Menu Items—

As part of the overall effort to create and prepare nutritious school meals, food manufacturers are being called upon to integrate healthy ingredients into their recipes. For example, pastas, breakfast muffins, bagels and pizza recipes have all been adjusted to meet the district’s whole-grain standards.

Maximizing the Potential of USDA

Foods—CPS has focused on efforts to secure healthier foods from the federal government, which supplies schools with commodities through a program called USDA Foods. Each year, CPS receives an estimated \$10 million in products such as beef, chicken and cheese from USDA Foods.

TABLE 2 Chicago Public Schools Meal Standards*

Old CPS Standards	New CPS Standards
Meets USDA standards**	Exceeds USDA and <i>HealthierUS School Challenge</i> Gold standards Incorporates major components of the IOM recommendations
Fruit daily	Variety of fresh fruit must be offered daily Canned fruit must be packed in natural juice or light syrup Fruit juice servings are limited
Vegetables daily	Choices must vary daily—fresh or frozen vegetables preferred Increases the amount of dark green and orange vegetables Limits starchy vegetables
Occasional whole grains	Serving of whole grains every day at lunch 25% whole-grain requirement at breakfast
Trans fats allowed	Menus are planned with zero trans fats
No fiber requirement	Breakfast: minimum of 3 grams of fiber Lunch: minimum of 7 grams of fiber
No sodium standard	Goal of 5% annual reduction until 2020 No sodium added in meal preparation
No breakfast product restrictions	No donuts, breakfast pastries or pop tarts No items containing “dessert or candy type” ingredients or flavors
No cereal standard	No more than 5 grams of sugar in the cereal unless there is also 3 or more grams of fiber
Local produce encouraged	Preference to locally grown and processed fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables when economically feasible
No restrictions on condiments	All salad dressing and mayonnaise must be reduced fat
Treats up to 3 times per week	Treats that meet snack guidelines are allowed once a week
Nachos daily in high schools	Once a month in elementary school Once a week in high school as part of a reimbursable meal
Deep-fat frying allowed	Deep-fat frying prohibited
Low-fat milk encouraged	Nonfat and low-fat white and chocolate milk allowed Whole milk allowed when medically necessary

* Printed with permission from the Chicago Public Schools

** USDA federal school meal standards in effect since 1995; does not reflect USDA’s 2011 proposed changes

CPS also received a 2010 Learning Lab grant from School Food FOCUS—a national initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation—to conduct research on the procurement of healthier options from both USDA and the wholesale market. Chefs in the district are testing recipes with lower-sodium cheese, and some lower-sodium chicken options are planned for the 2011-2012 menus.

In addition, School Food FOCUS is conducting research on the possibility of including antibiotic-free chicken products in school meals. CPS’s efforts brought about the lowering of sugar in flavored milk, and it is targeting breakfast cereals by encouraging manufacturers to create versions that meet the district’s lower-sugar, high-fiber standards.

Increasing Participation in School Meal Programs

Like many school districts around the country, CPS has made it a priority to increase the number of students who participate in the school breakfast and lunch programs, thereby providing students with reliable access to healthy food.

CPS’s quest to increase breakfast participation began in 2007 with a universal breakfast in the classroom pilot program, which now serves meals to students in 200 schools at no charge. The program expansion has resulted in more than six million additional meals served during the past school year, and CPS plans to offer it districtwide by June 30, 2011. Chicago’s McAuliffe Elementary School (see Case Study 3) was the first in Chicago to implement breakfast in the classroom. Today, 70 percent of McAuliffe’s students eat a healthy breakfast each school day.

Since the original program was implemented, the method of meal delivery varies from school to school. Some serve breakfast in their classrooms, but the most popular model is what is known as “grab-and-go,” in which students select their meal on the way to class in the morning.

CPS has utilized inventive techniques in its effort to bring more students into its meal programs. For example, menus that take into consideration the cultural food preferences of children are an important factor in gaining students’ approval of new foods. The district also conducts food tastings and focus groups with students to test proposed new

entrée choices for the CPS menus. These approaches have proven to be important in increasing the number of students who eat breakfast and lunch at school, particularly at the elementary level.

CASE STUDY 3 Breakfast Success at McAuliffe Elementary

Ninety-seven percent of the student body at McAuliffe Elementary, a public school in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood, comes from low-income households. In 2007, through the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Healthy Eating by Design Partnership and under the leadership of Principal David Pino, McAuliffe became the first school in the district to start a universal breakfast in the classroom program, which increased the number of students who eat breakfast at school from 200 to more than 600. Providing breakfast at no charge to all students at McAuliffe ensures they have proper nutrition for academic success.

Each morning, breakfast options are delivered to the classroom. Teachers report that children learn how to clean up after themselves and, having had a nutritious start to the day, are more attentive during their lessons. This time is used to provide mini-nutrition education and health lessons.

McAuliffe’s principal points to several positive changes since the program started: Test scores have improved, visits to the school nurse have declined, students are more focused and fewer disciplinary issues have been reported.

Renovating School Kitchen Equipment

Preparing healthy meals requires a greater understanding of the proper handling, preparation, cooking and storing of fresh food. Without the right facilities, serving safe and healthy menu items to Chicago's 400,000 students would prove nearly impossible. Schools across the country are grappling with how to integrate appropriate cooking methods for less-processed foods in school kitchens populated with dilapidated and outdated equipment.

CPS made a significant step toward preparing and serving healthy meals by adopting a "no deep-fat frying" policy. However, this move created a great need among the district's schools for industrial kitchen equipment with the capacity to cook large quantities of healthy dishes. The transition from fryers to healthier preparation methods has required careful planning and investment. For CPS, this called for a phased-in approach for installing ovens and steamers to replace deep-fat fryers.

In 2009, CPS calculated it would need \$7 million to improve cooking equipment in kitchens across the district in order to provide food service staff with the tools to prepare healthier meals. In response to this need, it applied for government grants for which CPS received \$1.5 million. These funds were used to install steamers in 65 schools, which provide capacity for

preparing vegetables and grains. The grants also funded combination oven-steamers for use in centralized school kitchens in which large amounts of food are cooked and then shipped out to schools around the district.

CPS is now moving forward with evaluating and updating the rest of its school kitchen equipment and serving facilities. The Healthy Schools Campaign works with local businesses and civic leaders to support these efforts. In 2010, more than 70 salad bars opened in schools, 10 of which were provided by corporate partners United Fresh Produce Foundation and Chiquita Brands International. Salad bars have proven to be a successful way of increasing vegetable consumption, particularly for elementary school students.

Training Food Service Workers

The switch by CPS to healthier menus required a personnel investment in the training of cooks and managers on methods for preparing, storing and serving more recipe-based food items. CPS now requires food service vendors to use a registered dietitian in menu planning and evaluation. The vendor must provide training for its staff and daily on-site supervision. Furthermore, school dining managers must receive professional development education at least six times per year in a formal classroom setting, with ongoing training throughout the year.

Mandatory Food Service Training Topics

- Sanitary Food Handling Practices
- Menu Compliance
- Culinary Training
- Hospitality
- Meal and Cash Accountability
- Staffing and Productivity

Because the new CPS menus use fewer processed ingredients, both cooks and school dining managers must know how to safely prepare and cook food without sacrificing taste. In accordance with its contract, Chartwells-Thompson hired a team of ten professional chefs and three culinary trainers to conduct training sessions and provide continuing education to workers throughout the year. Additionally, as CPS prepared to roll out its healthier menus in August 2010, more than 250 cooks and 100 school dining managers took part in a day-long, hands-on culinary training. Participants had the opportunity to gain new skills, as well as to expand their palates by trying foods such as hummus for the first time.



On the Horizon

“Our commitment to improving the health and wellness of our students is at the forefront of all administrative and operational programmatic changes that we deliver.”

—Louise Esaian, CPS logistics officer

CPS and its nonprofit and corporate partners have developed strategies for meeting higher nutrition standards, while using a cost-neutral approach. The school district has introduced many new and healthy menu items, and over the coming year it will continue to monitor its budget and any revenue changes brought on by these changes.

CPS has a 70 percent participation rate overall for the school lunch program, which is already well above the national average.¹⁰ Early results indicate that the number of students eating school lunches has increased at the elementary level and decreased in high school, resulting in an overall participation drop of five percent over the prior school year—a trend that is typical immediately following menu changes. The district will also continue its efforts to increase student participation by conducting focus groups, surveys and taste tests to gather students’ feedback on healthier menu items.

Since CPS implemented its nutrition standards in 2010, there has also been major progress in national efforts to improve school meal programs. The Healthy, Hunger-Free

Kids Act enacted in December 2010 contains significant quality improvements to the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. This law, which authorizes the first significant funding increase in more than 30 years for school meals, requires that national nutrition standards for all foods and beverages served and sold in schools are updated, stronger food safety measures are implemented and training opportunities for school food service workers are increased.

In January 2011, shortly after the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, USDA proposed a rule to update national nutrition standards for school meals, bringing them in line with the 2009 expert recommendations from the IOM and the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. CPS is positioned to fully implement USDA’s school meal standards once they are finalized, since its current menus already encompass most of the new requirements. CPS’s innovative efforts to work within existing budget constraints to provide safe and healthier meals can serve as a model of best practices for school districts across the country as they strive to achieve these same goals.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study—III: Volume II: Student Participation and Dietary Intakes*, Report No. CN-07-SNDA-III, November 2007, www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/published/CNP/FILES/SNDAlII-Vol2.pdf.
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- ⁸ Chris McNamara, “Local High Schoolers Cooking Up Change for Their Cafeterias,” *Chicago Tribune* online edition, November 4, 2009, articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-11-04/news/chi-school-lunch-contest-city-zonov04_1_healthy-schools-campaign-school-lunch-and-health-cafeterias/2 (accessed January 10, 2010).
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study-II, Report No. CN-08-MCII, April 2008*, www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/published/CNP/FILES/MealCostStudy.pdf (accessed May 2, 2011).
- ¹⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study—III: Volume II: Student Participation and Dietary Intakes*.

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For more information, see: www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org.



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