
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, Washington, DC

School Lunch Report Card

Fall 2002

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It's time for the nation's children to head back to school—and back to school lunch. Because parents and health professionals are interested in the nutrition quality of the meals being offered in school cafeterias, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) graded the nutrition quality of the menus offered in ten of the largest U.S. school districts participating in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

The NSLP is a federally assisted meal program operating in nearly 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. Schools that choose to participate in the program receive cash subsidies, donated commodities, and free bonus shipments for each meal served. In return, they must serve lunches that meet federal nutrition requirements, as well as offer free or reduced-price lunches to eligible children.

Background

On average, children in the United States consume too much total fat and saturated fat and far too few fruits and vegetables. These dietary patterns contribute to the rising problem of childhood obesity. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report on obesity in America found that 60 percent of overweight five- to ten-year-olds already have at least one risk factor for heart disease, such as raised blood pressure or insulin levels.

To reverse these trends, children should be served low-fat, plant-based meals, encouraging them to follow healthy, vegetarian eating habits right from the start. A diet drawn from varied plant sources easily achieves or maintains a healthy body weight without calorie counting and satisfies calcium and protein requirements, providing all essential amino acids—even without intentional combining or “protein complementing.” There is ample protein in whole grains, vegetables, and legumes, and plenty of calcium in green leafy vegetables, fortified juices, and other plant foods with health advantages that meat and dairy products lack. In short, diets built from grains, vegetables, fruits, and beans are easy to prepare, low-cost, and satisfying to hungry children while offering the most disease-fighting protection of any dietary pattern.

Review process and grading system

PCRM dietitians looked at 15 days of recent elementary school lunch menus for New York City, Los Angeles, Fort Lauderdale, Fairfax County (Virginia), Miami, Dallas, Houston, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, and Detroit.

One point was awarded for each time the menu included a low-fat vegetable side dish, a whole or dried fruit, a hot vegetarian entrée (meatless), a hot vegan entrée (meatless, dairy-free, and egg-free), or a vegan option by request over the 15-day period, totaling 75 possible points.

Twenty points were then awarded to each school district meeting the NSLP nutrition requirements, including less than 30 percent of calories from fat, less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, and one-third of the Recommended Daily Allowances (RDAs) for protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium, and calories. All of the school districts surveyed are currently meeting these nutrition guidelines.

An additional five points were given to school districts offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages, such as calcium-fortified orange juice, on a daily basis to help meet the calcium needs of students who either cannot or do not drink milk.

PCRM dietitians consulted the school districts' nutrition staffs as needed with questions about food items that could not be answered by reviewing the menus or the school districts' Web sites.

Each district was given a score out of 100 possible points, which was then converted into a letter grade.

Note: All of the school districts included in this survey are using the "Offer vs. Serve" (OVS) menu system. OVS is a federal regulation designed to reduce food waste in the lunch program by allowing students to choose only foods they intend to eat. The school lunch pattern includes five food items: 1. meat or meat alternative, 2. bread or bread alternative, 3. milk, 4. fruits, and 5. vegetables. Students are permitted to select anywhere from three to five of the five offered components of the meal. Students are not allowed to choose two of the same component, but they can request a second portion of fruit or vegetable at no extra charge.

Below are the possible points awarded for each category. One point is given for each time the menu includes each of the following items in 15 days of sample lunch menus, plus an additional 20 points for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines and 5 points for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages.

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	15
Whole or Dried Fruit:	15
Hot Meatless Entrée:	15
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	15
Vegan Option:	15
TOTAL:	<hr/> 75
	+ 20 for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 5 for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/> 100 points

The Criteria

Low-Fat Vegetable Side Dishes: 0 – 15 points

Research indicates that adults who regularly eat vegetables consumed these foods from childhood. Vegetables are packed with vitamin C, beta-carotene, riboflavin, iron, calcium, fiber, and other nutrients. Dark green, leafy vegetables, such as broccoli, collards, kale, mustard and turnip greens, chicory, and bok choy, are especially good sources of important nutrients for children. Dark yellow and orange vegetables, such as carrots, winter squash, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin, provide the powerful antioxidant beta-carotene. When schools offer tasty, low-fat vegetable side dishes, such as green salads, mixed vegetables, steamed broccoli, corn on the cob, and raw baby carrots with low-fat Italian salad dressing, children will adopt healthy eating habits that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. In this survey, one point was awarded for each day the school district offered a low-fat vegetable side dish. Points were not given for French fries, mashed potatoes, or tater tots.

Whole or Dried Fruit Offered as a Side Dish or Dessert: 0 – 15 points

As with vegetables, research shows that adults who eat fruits in adulthood also consumed them as children. Fruits are rich in fiber, vitamin C, and beta-carotene. Fruit juices contain less fiber than whole fruits. In this survey, one point was awarded for each day the school district offered a whole or dried fruit on the menu. Points were given for applesauce, but not for fruit juice or frozen fruit bars.

Vegetarian and Vegan Entrées and Vegan Options: 0 – 45 points

Nutrition research now emphasizes the importance of fiber, the health risks of cholesterol and fats, and the disease-preventive power of many nutrients found exclusively in plant-based foods. It has also been discovered that the plant kingdom provides excellent sources of the nutrients once associated only with meat and dairy products, namely, protein and calcium. The major killers of Americans—heart disease, cancer, and stroke—have a dramatically lower incidence among people consuming primarily plant-based diets. The condition of overweight, which contributes to a host of other health problems, can also be brought under control by following plant-based diets, even in children. Research shows that vegetarian children grow up to be

slimmer and healthier and live longer than their meat-eating friends. It is much easier to build a nutritious diet from vegetarian foods than to attempt to build one from animal products, which contain animal fat, cholesterol, and other substances that growing children certainly do not need. Vegan diets are best of all, as they are free of cholesterol, animal fat, and animal protein, while rich in fiber and numerous health-promoting nutrients.

With the approval of Alternate Protein Products (APPs) in the NSLP, schools are now able to provide children with meatless, cholesterol-free entrées. However, many of the healthier meat substitutes are not available in the commodity food program and cost the schools more to include in their menus.

In this survey, a maximum of 30 points was awarded for the frequency of both vegetarian (meatless) and vegan (meatless, dairy-free, and egg-free) entrées. However, due to the dangers of dairy product consumption (explained below), completely plant-based meals are preferred. When hot vegan entrées appeared on the menu, the school district received one point in the vegetarian entrée category and one point in the vegan entrée category.

Because many schools have not yet begun to feature vegetarian main entrées (but still include some plant-based selections in their menus), the category of “vegan option” was included in this review. Having a daily vegan choice, such as a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a salad bar, guarantees that children at least *have the option* to eat something that is meatless and dairy-free for lunch. Ideally, schools will begin offering vegan entrées, such as veggie burgers, bean and rice burritos, and veggie chili, on a regular basis so that children will be presented with nutritious selections, develop tastes for health-promoting foods, and acquire healthy eating habits that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Non-Dairy, Calcium-Rich Beverages: 0 or 5 points

Numerous scientific studies link the consumption of cow’s milk to obesity, anemia, ear infections, constipation, respiratory problems, heart disease, and some cancers. Due to the dangers of dairy product consumption, cow’s milk with added lactase, such as Lactaid® milk, is not a suitable alternative. And, as people of ethnicities other than Caucasian are typically unable to digest dairy protein, relying on dairy products as the sole source of calcium in child nutrition programs favors children of Northern European descent. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians’ 2002 report on lactose intolerance, 60 to 80 percent of blacks, 50 to 80 percent of Hispanics, 80 to 100 percent of American Indians, 95 to 100 percent of Asians, and 6 to 22 percent of American whites are lactose intolerant. Lactose intolerance, which is generally apparent by age three, causes flatulence, cramping, diarrhea, and bloating after eating dairy products in some individuals. Unfortunately, calcium-fortified juices are more expensive for school districts than the unfortified versions. Therefore, the USDA should mandate non-dairy, calcium-fortified beverages in child nutrition programs so that milk and other dairy products are not the only source of calcium available in school lunches.

Despite the extra expense, many school districts are already offering calcium-fortified juices in their school lunch programs. In this review, PCRM awarded 5 extra points to school districts that provide calcium-rich juices to students on a daily basis.

School District	Location	Points (out of 100)	Grade
Broward County School District	Fort Lauderdale, Fla.	85	B
Dade County School District	Miami, Fla.	71	C
Fairfax County Public Schools	Fairfax, Va.	71	C
New York City Public Schools	New York, N.Y.	70	C
Clark County School District	Las Vegas, Nev.	66	D
Dallas Independent School District	Dallas, Tex.	65	D
Los Angeles Unified School District	Los Angeles, Calif.	60	D
Philadelphia City School District	Philadelphia, Penn.	59	F
Detroit City School District	Detroit, Mich.	57	F
Houston Independent School District	Houston, Tex.	57	F

Broward County School District (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.): 85 points

The Broward County School District is the sixth largest district in the United States, with 243 schools enrolling 251,129 students. Fifteen sample menus from May 2002 were reviewed. The healthy quality of the lunches offered in this district surpassed the lunches offered in other districts due to Broward County’s inclusion of a daily salad bar, a hot potato bar with a number of vegetarian toppings, calcium-fortified juices, and the occasional offering of collard greens (a calcium- and vitamin-rich vegetable). Another unique menu item in Broward County is plantains, which is reported to be one of the children’s favorites. The only deficient category for the district is the hot vegan (meatless, dairy-free, and egg-free) entrée category. By daily offering tasty, hot vegan selections, such as bean burritos; low-fat, cholesterol-free veggie burgers instead of hamburgers or cheeseburgers; and spaghetti with marinara sauce instead of meat sauce; daily, Broward County would earn a perfect score.

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	15
Whole or Dried Fruit:	15
Hot Meatless Entrée:	15
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0
Vegan Option:	15
TOTAL:	60
	+ 20 for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 5 for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	85 points

Dade County School District (Miami, Fla.): 71 points

The Dade County School District is the fifth largest district in the United States, with 356 schools enrolling 368,625 students. Fifteen sample menus from July 2002 were reviewed. Dade County did not include calcium-fortified juices or non-dairy, calcium-rich foods on its menu, but it did offer a good variety of low-fat vegetable side dishes, such as mixed vegetable salads with light dressing, steamed broccoli, and corn on the cob, as well as a daily assortment of fresh fruit. Dade County offered a number of meatless entrées that included cheese; it could go one step further and make available completely plant-based meals to improve the nutrition value and score of its menus. By changing its cheese lasagna roll-up to a dairy-free lasagna roll-up with roasted vegetables and soy burger crumbles or substituting its cheese pizza burrito for a bean, rice, and vegetable burrito, Dade County could provide healthier offerings in its lunch menu.

(Dade County)

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	13	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	15	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	8	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	51	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 0	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	71	points

Fairfax County Public Schools (Fairfax, Va.): 71 points

The Fairfax County Public School District is the 14th largest district in the United States, with 195 schools enrolling 156,412 students. Fifteen sample menus from September 2002 were reviewed. Like Broward County, Fairfax also offers calcium-fortified juices, which were added to the menu to meet the needs of lactose-intolerant students and those who choose not to consume milk products for religious or other reasons. Unique to Fairfax County was the inclusion of jicama, a root vegetable nicknamed the “Mexican potato.” Although the district offers a daily peanut butter and jelly sandwich as a vegan option, it could improve its score by changing the spaghetti with meat sauce to spaghetti with marinara sauce, replacing the beef ravioli with soy ravioli, and substituting the pork egg rolls with steamed vegetable dumplings.

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	10	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	15	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	6	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	<hr/> 46	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 5	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/> 71	points

New York City Public Schools (New York, N.Y.): 70 points

The New York City Public School District is the largest school district in the United States, with 1,213 schools enrolling 1,066,516 students. Fifteen sample menus from June 2002 were reviewed. New York City excelled in its daily offerings of unique, low-fat vegetable side dishes, as well as fresh fruit. The June menu included such items as fiesta blend vegetables (a mixture of vegetables and beans), garden salads, romaine salads, seasoned green beans, and seasoned spinach. New York City was also the only school district in this year's survey to offer a vegetable patty as a hot, vegan entrée. However, points were lost for the remaining days where hot vegetarian and/or vegan main dishes were not offered, as well as for the absence of a daily non-dairy, calcium-rich beverage.

(New York City Public Schools)

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	13	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	15	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	6	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	1	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	<hr/> 50	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 0	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/> 70	points

Clark County School District (Las Vegas, Nev.): 66 points

The Clark County School District is the ninth largest district in the United States, with 259 schools enrolling 231,655 students. Fifteen sample menus from May 2002 were reviewed. Although Clark County offers calcium-fortified juices daily, it lost points by offering low-fat vegetable side dishes on only 7 of the 15 days. It did offer a bean burrito as a hot, vegan entrée on one day. Clark County could improve its score by replacing meat-based Sloppy Joes with a healthier vegetarian Sloppy Joe made from soy crumbles and by using low-fat vegetable patties instead of higher-fat meat patties.

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	7	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	12	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	6	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	1	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	41	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 5	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	66	points

Dallas Independent School District (Dallas, Tex.): 65 points

The Dallas Independent School District is the 12th largest district in the United States, with 221 schools enrolling 161,548 students. Fifteen sample menus from May 2002 were reviewed. The Dallas Independent School District offers calcium-fortified orange juice to help meet the calcium requirements of its students. It also offers a number of legume and black-eyed pea side dishes, which are high in fiber and packed with nutrients. The district's nutrition department reported the frequency of veggie burgers, baked potatoes with vegetarian toppings, and rice-and-beans selections on the menu, but these did not appear on the days PCRM surveyed. If these hot vegan items had appeared in its daily menu, the Dallas Independent School District would have scored significantly higher.

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	12	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	10	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	3	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	15	
Vegan Option:	0	
TOTAL:	<hr/> 40	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 5	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/> 65	points

Los Angeles Unified School District (Los Angeles, Calif.): 60 points

The Los Angeles Unified School District is the second largest school district in the United States, with 659 schools enrolling 721,346 students. Fifteen sample menus from July 2002 were reviewed. Los Angeles Unified offered healthy green salads and fresh fruit on most days. However, the district was lacking in meatless and dairy-free entrées, as well as in non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages. Including calcium-fortified juices and a daily hot vegan entrée, such as a vegetable patty, soy hot dog, or veggie burrito, would help its nutrition score. The Web site for the Los Angeles Unified School District stated that 40 percent of its students are overweight or obese, and making these healthy changes might help reduce that number.

(Los Angeles Unified School District)

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	13	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	11	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	1	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	<hr/> 40	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 0	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/> 60	points

Philadelphia City School District (Philadelphia, Penn.): 59 points

The Philadelphia City School District is the eighth largest school district in the United States, with 261 schools enrolling 201,190 students. Fifteen sample menus from January 2002 were reviewed. Philadelphia only had eight sample days where a low-fat vegetable side dish was offered, and most of those offerings were corn. To improve the variety and nutrition quality of their menus, this district should include a daily vegetable choice, such as steamed broccoli, green salads with low-fat dressing, oriental vegetable medleys, and raw carrots with low-fat dip. No hot vegan entrées were offered; however, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich could be chosen on a daily basis. Also, for lactose-intolerant children with a doctor's note, Lactaid® milk was provided. However, due to the health complications associated with dairy product consumption, offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages is ideal.

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	8	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	12	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	4	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	<hr/>	39
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 0	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/>	59 points

Detroit City School District (Detroit, Mich.): 57 points

The Detroit City School District is the 11th largest school district in the United States, with 263 schools enrolling 162,194 students. Fifteen sample menus from May 2002 were reviewed. Detroit City offered a low-fat vegetable side dish on only 8 of the 15 selected menu days. Adding green salads or raw vegetables with low-fat dip to the daily menu would give the district a perfect vegetable score. Also, Lactaid® milk is provided for students who are unable to tolerate cow's milk. A healthier step would be to offer calcium-fortified juices to all students on a daily basis. For healthier menus, Detroit City should offer daily hot vegan entrées, such as vegetable patties

instead of the chicken and hamburger patties, soy hot dogs instead of the rib barbecue on a bun, and a bean burrito instead of the bean and beef burrito.

(Detroit City School District)

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	8	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	11	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	3	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	<hr/>	
	37	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 0	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/>	
	57	points

Houston Independent School District (Houston, Tex.): 57 points

The Houston Independent School District is the seventh largest school district in the United States, with 289 schools enrolling 208,462 students. Fifteen sample menus from June 2002 were reviewed. On most days, the district offered a low-fat vegetable side dish, such as the vegetable stack, mixed vegetables, or seasoned spinach, but lacked meatless, dairy-free, egg-free entrées and non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages. Offering calcium-rich juices and exchanging the spaghetti with meat sauce for spaghetti with marinara sauce, the hot dogs for soy dogs, and the hamburger for a low-fat veggie burger would help this score significantly.

The frequency of each of the following on 15 sample lunch menu days:

Low-Fat Vegetable Side-Dish:	10	
Whole or Dried Fruit:	12	
Hot Meatless Entrée:	0	
Hot Meatless, Dairy-Free, Egg-Free Entrée	0	
Vegan Option:	15	
TOTAL:	<hr/> 37	
	+ 20	for meeting NSLP nutrition guidelines
	+ 0	for offering non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages
TOTAL:	<hr/> 57	points