



## Healthy Foods in Schools

*By Emily Heller and Tabra Johnson*

More than 30 million American students receive lunch through the [National School Lunch Program](#) and more than 14 million receive breakfast through the [School Breakfast Program](#), both administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Since [students consume up to half of their calories](#) at school, the federal and state governments have targeted schools as venues for offering kids healthy foods.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [research shows](#) that students' health behaviors, including eating a healthy diet, are tied to academic achievement, affecting cognitive skills (such as concentration and memory), grades, attendance and graduation rates. The research also shows that inadequate consumption of certain nutrients, such as vitamins A and C, iron and calcium, are associated with lower grades and increased absenteeism and tardiness.

Although the link between proper nutrition and academic achievement is well established, [most U.S. children consume](#) more than the recommended amount of sugar, fat and sodium, and not enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

### Federal Action

The federal [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#) required the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update nutrition standards for school meals based on the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are jointly published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and USDA every five years. The law's updates to school meal nutrition standards include increasing fruit and vegetable variety and servings, requiring all milk served to be low-fat or fat-free, and reducing sodium content, among other requirements. [More than 95 percent](#) of schools are currently meeting the new quality standards, and a [2015 study](#) shows increased fruit consumption and reduced waste following the law's implementation.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act also requires each school district participating in a federal food program to implement a local school wellness policy with nutrition and physical activity goals for all schools under its jurisdiction. Beginning in the 2015-16 school year, the law also required school food service employees to meet new professional standards. As of June 1, 2016, Congress is considering the reauthorization of child nutrition programs, which would alter some of the requirements schools must meet.

The USDA has provided school food authorities participating in the National School Lunch Program \$215 million in [Equipment Assistance Grants](#) since 2009, allowing recipients to purchase new kitchen equipment to provide healthier meals and meet new nutrition standards.

### Did You Know?

- [Participation in the School Breakfast Program](#) is associated with higher grades and standardized test scores, reduced absenteeism and improved cognitive performance.
- At least 39 states and the District of Columbia have [some type of policy](#) to support farm-to-school programs.
- On average, [more than 30 million](#) students receive lunch every day through the National School Lunch Program.

## State Action

States have enacted numerous strategies to help ensure students have access to healthier food and beverages at school, or to encourage other community supports for child nutrition.

**Farm-to-School.** [Farm-to-school programs](#) bring local, healthy food to students by connecting local agricultural producers with schools and incorporating information about how food is grown into school curricula. [Research demonstrates](#) that students who participate in farm-to-school programs consume more fruits and vegetables, and have increased knowledge about healthy food choices.

States have enacted various types of legislation to support these programs, including creating statewide programs and task forces, appropriating funding, creating grant programs and encouraging school gardens. [Missouri Senate Bill 701](#), for example, created a statewide farm-to-school program within its agriculture department in 2014. The program helps schools provide students locally grown foods. It also permits the state's Agricultural and Small Business Development Authority to make grants, loans or loan guarantees for businesses to access and process locally grown agricultural products for use in schools.

**Equipment and Training.** According to a [report](#) from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, most school food staff need additional training in areas such as cooking skills, food safety and compliance with nutritional standards. [State-specific Pew reports](#) also show that most school districts need kitchen infrastructure updates and at least one new piece of equipment in order to provide healthy lunches more effectively and efficiently. Despite existing grant opportunities, many schools lack funds to provide training and update equipment and infrastructure.

Some states are addressing this issue by funding school food staff training and equipment. For example, the California Legislature passed [Assembly Bill 1497](#) in 2011 to train school food authorities about the new nutritional standards mandated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.

**Timing.** [Research](#) shows that when students have insufficient time to eat lunch, they are less likely to choose fruit and consume less of their entrées, vegetables and milk. [At least 10 states](#) require schools to provide students with adequate time to eat lunch. Some of these laws require schools to provide a certain amount of time for lunch (usually a minimum of 20 minutes to 30 minutes), such as [Connecticut House Bill 5344](#), enacted in 2004, and the Washington D.C. [Healthy Schools Act](#), enacted in 2011. Others encourage local districts to either create a policy or ensure adequate time for lunch.

At least eight states have enacted “breakfast after the bell” laws to provide students with breakfast during the school day, either by serving the meal in classrooms or by offering “grab-and-go” items. Recent acts include [Nevada Senate Bill 503](#) (2015) and [Colorado House Bill 1006](#) (2013), which both require schools, where most students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, to serve breakfast after the start of the school day.

**Eliminating Reduced-Price Lunch Co-Pay.** Some states have enacted laws, including [Colorado House Bill 1156](#) (2014) and [Oregon House Bill 2545](#) (2015), appropriating funds to provide free lunches to students who would otherwise pay a reduced fee for lunch.

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