

### Is school food quality the root of what's holding your child back?



If you grew up in the United States, it is more than likely that you could share a horror story regarding the nutritional value of a meal your school provided. Whether it be ketchup and french fries as a vegetable, a syrup infused waffle counting as a whole grain, or mac and cheese somehow standing in as a protein filled meal, generations of Americans agree that school meals at face value are not the most nutritious. The image above of a well balanced, colorful, and produce filled lunch is not what most of us picture when we imagine a school meal. But it really should be.

Currently, the United States Department of Agriculture and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans are the basis for the creation of school food program menus. These criteria highlight the importance of fruits and vegetables in meals, require fluid milk at each meal, and provide a protein and whole grain requirement. Do you recall seeing the colorful divided up plate graphic in your child's cafeteria? This is the work of MyPlate and the USDA who created a visual for what a plate should look like based on their criteria. The graphic is accessible to young children as it shows the portions in accordance to the circle **plate, however**, in a cafeteria it is more than likely that students have rectangle trays that are quite large and need not be filled completely as the MyPlate graphic implies. Therein lies the issue: criteria and guides **exist, however**, the ways in which they are implemented are not monitored, leaving too much wiggle room for schools.



Schools are required to hit these USDA criteria with every meal they provide to students, however, there are round about ways of achieving each criterion. Thinking back to your school food experiences, you might recall peaches in sugar water or jelly in a sandwich as a fruit or mashed potatoes being your vegetable. These tactics still work today, and they are setting students up for failure in the classroom, in their social development, and their physical growth.

Throughout childhood, well balanced and nutrient dense meals are crucial for proper growth and development. Most parents do not have extensive education on the best meals for their kids, however, schools have the resources to help educate both students and parents on proper nutrition through the formulation of school food menus. These menus, if developed in accordance with the USDA and Dietary Guidelines for Americans, would be sufficient in providing students with the nutrients they need from their meals; they could also serve as a stepping stone to teach parents recipes that continue to provide these nutrient dense meals at home.

Any time the news focuses on childhood health these days it seems there are new findings for increasing occurrence of childhood obesity, diabetes, and other chronic illnesses. These climbing statistics are alarming and their implications are critical; these chronic illnesses are a burden to one's health over the span of a lifetime. As these are progressively becoming more common in children, the quality and duration of their lives are in danger. According to the CDC, healthy weight and proper nutrition are the most powerful ways to prevent childhood obesity and diabetes.

~~In order~~ to promote healthy weight and proper nutrition, it is crucial that schools provide students with the nutrients they need to properly grow and develop. One step is to encourage maintaining a healthy weight and consuming fruits and vegetables regularly. This will help prevent early onset of these chronic illnesses. It is up to those who feed our children regularly to take that seriously and act immediately.

Better policy implementation and monitoring is ultimately the best method for change, as it holds individual schools accountable. This can be done through policy reform as well as through the implementation of a statewide school food menu. This way, individual schools need not hire dietitians, but rather one dietitian works for the state to generate the weekly and monthly menus.

As parents, there are many ways you can get involved in this conversation and you should for the benefit of your children's development. Talking to school administration, school district boards, and state representatives are the best ways to bring up the conversation of change.