

DIETITIAN Q&A:

FRESH

School Meal Innovations

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Q. I want my child to eat a healthy breakfast. What's on the menu for school breakfast?

A. School meals are healthy meals that are required to follow updated nutrition standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which limit unhealthy fat, calories and sodium. Whether served in the cafeteria, from a grab-and-go cart, or in the classroom, school breakfast provides delicious, kid-friendly meals to fuel students for the day, including:

- **A variety of fresh and seasonal fruits and veggies.**
- **Breads and cereals that are all whole grain-rich (with cereals that are already reduced-sugar).**
- **Low-fat or non-fat flavored or unflavored milk.**
- **Protein-rich foods like eggs, yogurt or lean meats may be offered too.**

You can expect school breakfast to have less sodium. The average breakfast offered contains 540 mg or less for younger children and 640 mg or less for older children. Also, students are offered at least 1 whole cup and served at least ½ cup serving of fruit or vegetable as part of every meal. Each week, school cafeterias must offer legumes (such as kidney beans, lentils, chickpeas), dark greens (broccoli, spinach, collards, for example) and red or orange vegetables (including carrots, sweet potatoes, bell peppers), along with limited amounts of starchy foods (potatoes, corn) and other vegetables (such as cucumbers and celery).

Example:

- **Whole grain French toast sticks + fresh grapes + flavored or unflavored non-fat or low-fat milk**
- **Egg & cheese whole wheat bagel sandwich + fresh fruit + non-fat plain milk**
- **Whole grain breakfast bar + fruit flavored yogurt + fresh apple slices + milk**



Q. Isn't serving breakfast at home cheaper than buying at school?

A. Actually, school breakfast is the better deal. The average cost for a nutritious and balanced school breakfast is \$1.55 – up to \$2 cheaper than an average packed breakfast with ingredients from the grocery store. But also, many students might qualify for free or reduced-price school meals – making the gap between the two options even greater.

Q. That's great to know a school meal is a healthy option and includes more fruits and vegetables. But will my kid actually eat it?

A. As parents and caregivers, we know even if foods are healthy, it doesn't necessarily mean kids will eat them. New foods can be challenging for kids. That's why we offer our Healthy Bites sampling program. Students can sample new menu items – including fruits and veggies – and learn a fun food and nutrition fact about that recipe, before deciding to get it. The feedback we collect from students through surveys is used to update our menus. This way, we can make certain the recipes we develop are healthy, taste great, and are on target as the types of foods currently popular with students. You may be surprised what your kids might try at school!

Q. How does the school ensure the food being served is high quality?

A. Aramark, your school's food service provider, is committed to providing safe, nutritious food, prepared fresh daily. We work directly with food companies to set new industry standards for healthier foods, and incorporate wholesome, natural ingredients, and source foods rich in fiber and essential vitamins and minerals.

Q. Where are the fruits and vegetables in the school lunch grown?

A. All foods served as part of the USDA National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs must be grown in the United States. Aramark aims to support local farmers and serve locally grown fruits and vegetables whenever possible.

Q. Are school lunches really a healthy option?

A. Yes! All meals from The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) must follow strict standards set by the USDA. Students must be offered, at a minimum, the following during every lunch (range represents different requirements by grade level):

- **1/2 to 1 cup of fruit**
- **¾ to 1 cup of vegetables (including a mix of colors like dark green, red and orange)**
- **1 to 2 servings of whole grains**
- **1 to 2 or more ounces of meat or vegetarian protein**
- **1 cup of low-fat or non-fat milk**

In addition, meals must meet specific nutrient criteria for calories, saturated fat, and sodium to promote good health.

Q. But how does this food compare to lunches brought from home?

A. Here are the findings of three studies that examined packed lunches versus lunches bought at school:^{1,2,3}

- **Students who purchased school lunch were more likely to consume milk, fruit and vegetables than those who brought lunch from home.**
- **Only 27% of packed lunches met three of the five requirements mentioned above that every school lunch must contain.**
- **Packaged foods were the most common item found in packed lunches.**
- **Packed lunches contained more sodium compared to NSLP guidelines.**

Q. So school lunches may be nutritious, but how do they taste?

A. Aramark's team of dietitians and chefs develop nutritious and innovative menus using insights that help determine the most preferred flavors and recipes. We collect feedback from students, school faculty, and parents through surveys, taste tests, and sampling events. This helps determine what recipes make it onto cafeteria menus and featured as limited time offer promotions. School lunch examples include popular items with a healthy twist, such as:

- **Chicken nuggets with whole-grain coating**
- **Whole-grain crusted pizzas**
- **Baked chicken patties**
- **Whole-wheat burritos**
- **Oven baked French fries... and so much more!**

Q. My child is a vegetarian. Are there any decent school lunch options for her?

A. Nowadays, school cafeterias offer a wide variety of choices based on students' specific diet requirements and lifestyle choices, including lunches that are vegetarian and vegan, or lunches made without ingredients such as gluten, nuts, dairy or soy.

Q. How do I know if our school cafeteria has these offerings on a given day?

A. Contact your school cafeteria manager or arrange a meeting with your school nutrition director to make certain your child's specific food needs are being met and to learn if there are additional available options. Otherwise, be sure to check-out the school's menu online.

Q. How do you engage with students to get them interested on the school food being offered?

A. School cafeteria food has come a long way to better reflect what is seen in food retail. Our weekly and monthly menus include a large variety of fresh and vibrant food options that are based on the latest food trends and test well with our students. We introduce exciting new recipes each month, engage students with special themed promotions each week – and we always reach out for feedback! You can arrange a visit with your school cafeteria manager to see and sample a school meal firsthand. If you are interested to see what's happening nationwide, check out the "School Meals Rock" Pinterest and Facebook pages for delicious examples of school meals.



A selection of Aramark's delicious and nutritious school lunch offerings.

Visit [FYP365.com](https://www.fyp365.com) for healthy living ideas and inspiration.



1 Hubbard KL, et al. What's in Children's Backpacks: Foods Brought From Home JADA. 2014; 142:1424-1431. • 2 Caruso ML, Cullen KW. Quality and Cost of Student Lunches Brought From Home. JAMA Pediatr. 2015;169(1):86-90. • 3 Farris AR, et al. Nutritional Comparison of Packed and School Lunches in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Children Following the Implementation of the 2012-13 National School Lunch Program Standards. J Nutr Educ Behav 2014;46(6): 621-626