10 Key Findings on the Impact of School Nutrition Programs

Healthy Eating Research

Introduction

A new special issue in the journal *Nutrients* includes 15 studies that provide important insights on the progress schools have made in promoting healthier school environments based on data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS).

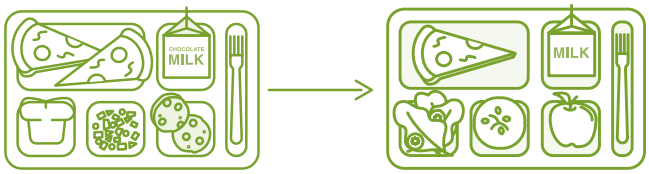
The SNMCS is the most comprehensive school nutrition study in the United States and the first nationally representative study to assess school meals after implementation of nutrition standards established by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010. The nutrition standards for school lunch and breakfast include daily and weekly meal requirements on components such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and limits on calories, sodium, and saturated fat. This study collected data from over 1,200 schools, 2,000 students, and 500 school food authorities during the 2014-2015 school year.

These 10 key findings from the SNMCS and the Nutrients special issue studies cover a variety of school nutrition topics including school meals and snacks, the school food environment, school meal participation, and state and local policies including universal free meals.

The nutritional quality of most foods and beverages served and sold in schools has improved dramatically between the 2009-2010 and 2014-2015 school years.

1 The nutritional quality of school meals significantly increased since full implementation of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA). (SNMCS, Vol 2)

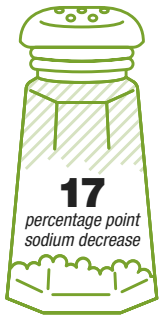
The nutritional quality of school lunch increased by 41%, and breakfast by 44%.



+41% healthier

2 Significant progress has been made in reducing sodium and increasing whole grains in school meals. (SNMCS, Vol 2)

The Healthy Eating Index-2010 (HEI) score (a range from 0-100 with higher scores indicating healthier meals) for sodium increased by 17 percentage points indicating that the concentration of sodium in school lunches decreased over time, and the HEI score for whole grains increased from 24.5 to 95.3.



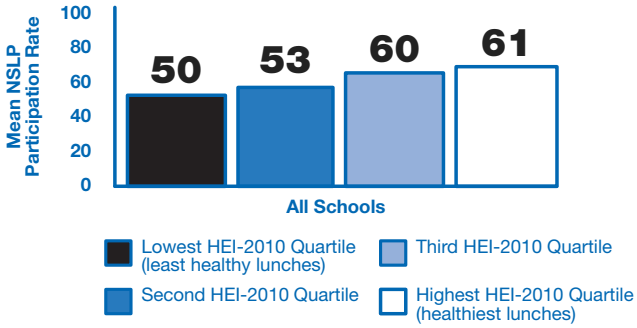
3 The 2020 - 2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) recommend limiting calories from added sugars to no more than 10% each day, yet there is currently not a limit for added sugars in school meals. Consequently, many snack foods and beverages, especially flavored milk, and some meals have excessive amounts of sugar. (Special Issue: Fox)

During SY 2014-2015, most school breakfasts (92%) had excessive amounts of added sugars, while almost three quarters of lunches (69%) exceeded DGA recommendations. The leading source of added sugars in school meals was flavored milk.

Schools with healthy meals provide a broad range of benefits to both schools and kids.

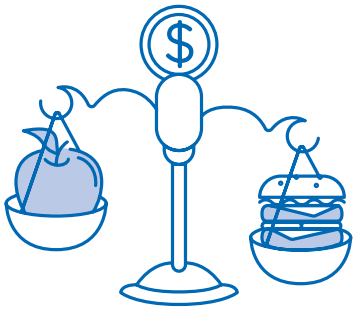
4 **School lunches of higher nutritional quality were found to be associated with higher rates of participation in school lunch programs. (SNMCS, Vol 4)**

The average school lunch participation rate for schools with the healthiest meals was 61 percent compared with 50 percent for schools with the least healthy meals.



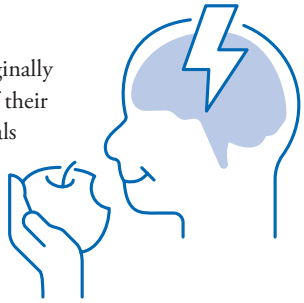
5 **Healthy meals do not cost schools more. (SNMCS, Vol 3)**

The average full cost for preparing the healthiest school lunches totaled $5.77, while the least healthy lunches cost $5.85 on average. Similarly, breakfast costs were not related to the healthfulness of the meal.



6 **Students in food-insecure and marginally secure households were more likely to participate in school meals programs compared to students in food-secure households. This suggests that efforts to encourage participation in school meals are appropriately focused on students with greater need. (Special Issue: Forrestal)**

Students in food insecure and marginally secure households received more of their daily energy needs from school meals compared to students from food-secure households (22%, 20%, and 13%, respectively).



7 **Since implementation of the HHFKA nutrition standards, disparities in the nutritional quality of school meals have been reduced, with no reported differences in the quality of meals served across socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity. (Special Issue: Bardin)**

The Healthy Eating Index-2010 scores (a measurement of diet quality) for school lunches were consistent (81% to 83% of the maximum score) across all school poverty levels and racial/ethnic composition.

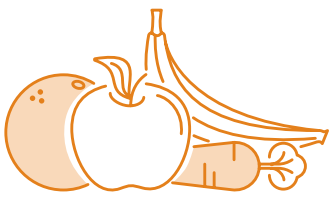
Strong state and local policies can bolster the impact of national nutrition standards.

8 **Offering free meals to all students (i.e. universal free meals or Community Eligibility Provision) can provide nutritious meals to more students without a financial disadvantage for schools and school districts. (Special Issue: Long)**

Participation in universal free meals was associated with increased participation in school meal programs, specifically in the school breakfast program and among students from food insecure and moderately food secure households. (Special Issue: Leider and Forestral)

9 **Strong national and state nutrition standards for snack and a la carte foods and beverages have positive impacts on children. (Special Issue: Schwartz)**

Strong state nutrition standards for snack and a la carte foods and beverages, which go beyond national Smart Snack standards, are associated with fewer unhealthy foods and beverages available in schools and lower body-mass index (BMI) in children.



10 **Local wellness policies benefit children. Schools in districts with strong wellness policies were found to have higher school breakfast participation rates, stronger procurement policies on saturated fats and sugars, and better school nutrition practices, such as student involvement in meal planning and providing nutrition information on items served. (Special Issue: Leider, Porter, McLoughlin)**

A strong district wellness policy, as opposed to no policy, was associated with more students eating school breakfast (28% vs 19%, respectively), and liking school breakfast (69% vs 54%, respectively).