



Food and Nutrition Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# HOW SCHOOL LUNCH IS MADE

AND HOW YOU CAN HELP



8th Grade School Lunch  
Informational Text  
FNS 948  
August 2022

FUELING LIFE  
MY HEALTHY LIFE



# HOW THIS STORY BEGAN...

**Have you ever walked through the lunch line and thought, “Why do we always have pizza on Fridays?” Or maybe, “Why is it always the same vegetables?” So did Ava and Jayden, but we’ll hear more about their story later...**

Each school day, the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) serves about 29.6 million lunches to children and teens<sup>1</sup> across the country! It takes a lot of work to get all those lunches to students, and many people are involved along the way, including Federal and State governments, dietitians, school nutrition professionals, menu planners, chefs, and farmers. Since students are at the center of the school lunch program, you can be part of the process. You may not realize it, but you can impact lunches too!

Now, let’s meet Ava and Jayden, as they show us how students can improve the way lunches are served at their school.

## PART 1: A LUNCHTIME A-HA MOMENT

One day at lunch, Ava and Jayden were sitting at their usual table and looking over the meals they grabbed from the lunch line.

Ava, these roasted sweet potatoes are really good. It’s just like how my mom makes them. I wonder if it’s a new recipe. Are you going to try them?

I don’t know. I don’t usually eat veggies at school, just at home. The food I get at home and at restaurants is different than what I get at school. I wonder what other kids think about the food served at school?

1. Based on 2019 data retrieved from: [www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/)





Ava and Jayden walked around the cafeteria to see for themselves and asked other students what they thought. Here's what they heard:



As Ava and Jayden walked around, they saw a lot of food in the garbage. Ava said, “Woah! Students throw away a lot of food.”

Jayden agreed, “Do you think students really don’t like all of this food?”

That food in the garbage is called **plate waste**. Plate waste can be the result of student preference, not having time to eat, foods being new and unfamiliar, or lunch being served too early or too late in the day.

Plate waste is not just a problem at schools, but also in restaurants and homes too.



“It looks like there are a lot of fruits and vegetables in the trash,” said Jayden. “I wonder how much food is being thrown away.”

Ava paused and said, “Maybe if students can help pick which foods are served, there would be less plate waste. We need to find out who picks our menus!”

Their science teacher Mr. Rivera had lunch duty, so Ava asked, “Who picks the foods for school lunch?”

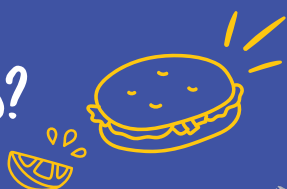
Mr. Rivera replied, “Great question! This school district has a school nutrition director who oversees school lunch. Her name is Mrs. Russo. Why?”

Jayden replied, “We have been talking to students, and we want to request some new foods for lunch. Is that even possible?”

Mr. Rivera paused, “Well, this school operates the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Let’s do a little research during class and I’ll set up a meeting for you with the school nutrition director.”

They returned to their table, quickly finished their lunch, and went to class.

## WHO PLANS YOUR SCHOOL MEALS?



The person that plans school meals at your school may be called the school nutrition director or school food service director. You can usually find contact information on your school district’s website where they post school lunch information.



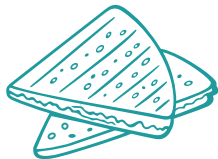


## PART 2: AVA AND JAYDEN START THEIR RESEARCH

Mr. Rivera gave Ava and Jayden a few websites to begin their research.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Rivera reviewed a few notes about the National School Lunch Program to get them started:

“NSLP is older than my grandparents,” said Jayden. Ava reviewed the notes and said, “It looks like USDA sets a meal pattern, but not the actual menu. Does that mean each school has a different menu?”

They continued their research and discovered that school menus looked different all over the country. Each menu met the USDA meal pattern for school lunch but included different locally produced foods and other popular regional foods.



### VOCABULARY

Look for the underlined words in the text.

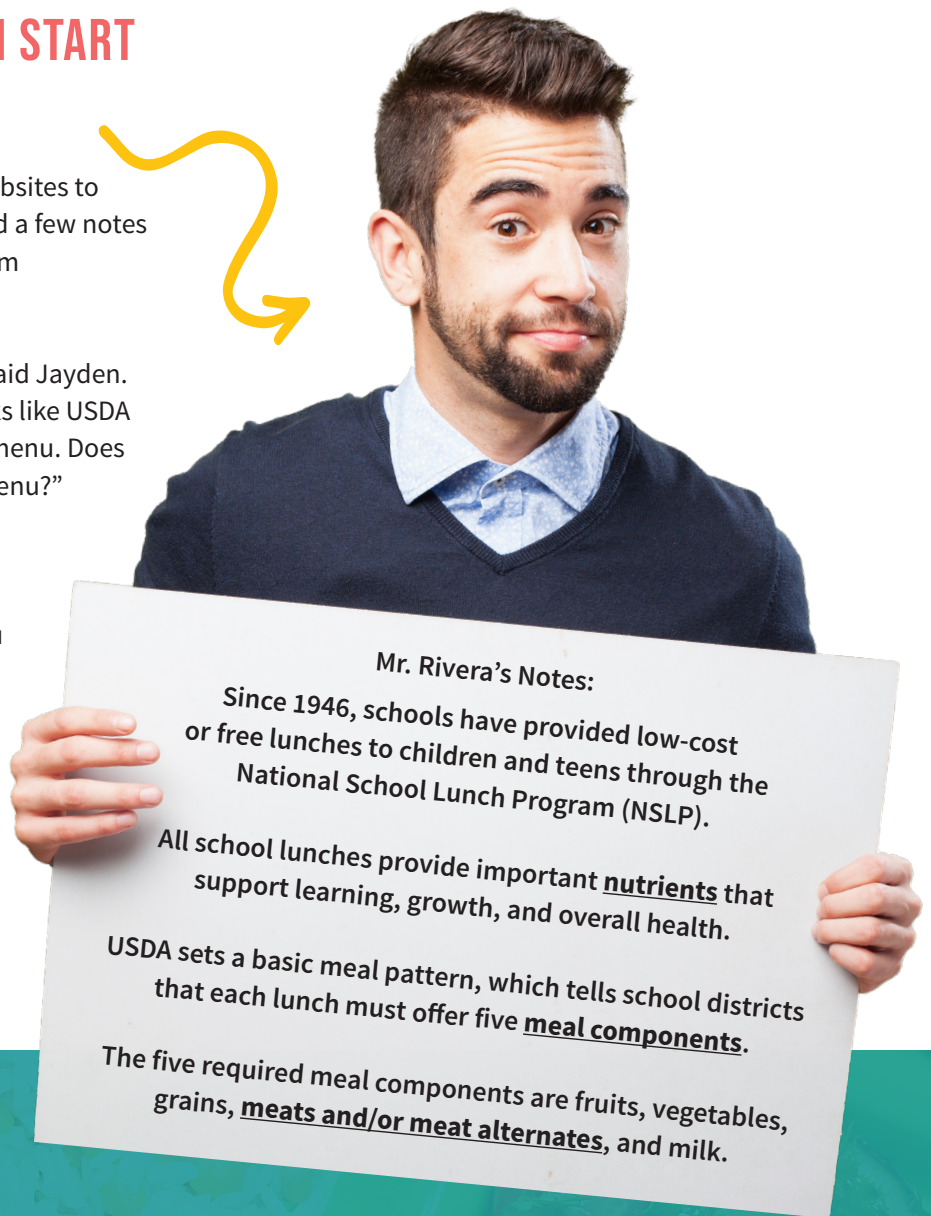
**Nutrient:** A substance that provides nourishment for growth or metabolism. Plants absorb nutrients mainly from the soil in the form of minerals and other inorganic compounds, and animals obtain nutrients from ingested foods.

**Meal Pattern:** requirements for meals served by the USDA’s National School Lunch Program. The meal pattern lists the meal components that must be offered at lunch, minimum amounts of each component, and requirements or limits for calories, sodium, and saturated fat in a weekly menu.

**Meal Component:** One of the food categories that comprise a reimbursable meal. These include fruits, vegetables, grains, meats and meat alternates, and milk.

**Meat and Meat Alternates:** Meats and meat alternates include meat, poultry, fish, cheese, yogurt, soy yogurt, dry beans and peas, whole eggs, tofu, tempeh, peanut butter or other nut or seed butters, and nuts and seeds.

**Plate Waste:** The amount of edible food that is served to a person and is not eaten.



2. Some of the links they found helpful include: [www.fns.usda.gov/nslp](http://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp); [www.fns.usda.gov/tn/myplate-guide-school-lunch](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/myplate-guide-school-lunch); [www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/nslp-fact-sheet](http://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/nslp-fact-sheet); [www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/program-history](http://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp/program-history)

# LUNCH MENUS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES!

## PUERTO RICO



Stewed Rice with Pinto Beans  
Pepper Medley  
Choice of Fruit  
Choice of Milk



Montana Bison Chili  
Homemade Rolls  
Salad Bar  
Apple Slices  
Choice of Milk



Veggie Lasagna  
Fresh Celery  
Carrots  
Jicama  
Grapes  
Choice of Milk



LOOK HOW  
DIFFERENT  
THE MENUS ARE!

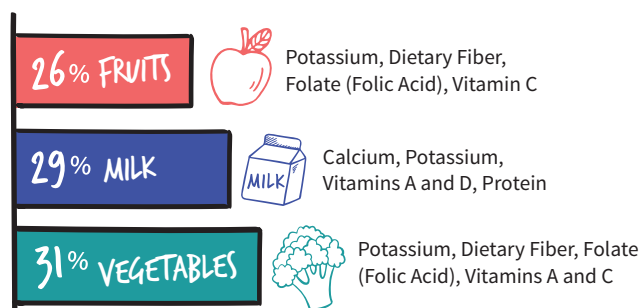
“School menus are so different. I wonder if other schools are also having trouble with students throwing away foods?” asked Jayden. Once again, they did their research. Ava and Jayden found a study that said plate waste was common, and that plate waste at school is highest for vegetables, milk, and fruits.<sup>3</sup>

“So, schools are all serving different lunches, but many schools are still having a problem with plate waste,” said Jayden. “Maybe if students helped taste test new recipes or menu items, there would be less plate waste.”

Ava replied, “Great point. I wonder if students at other schools are doing anything to change their menus.”

The answer was yes! They found out that students across the country were helping to shape the menus at their schools. Ava and Jayden decided they would do the same.

## Average Percentage of Food Served That is Thrown Away by Students

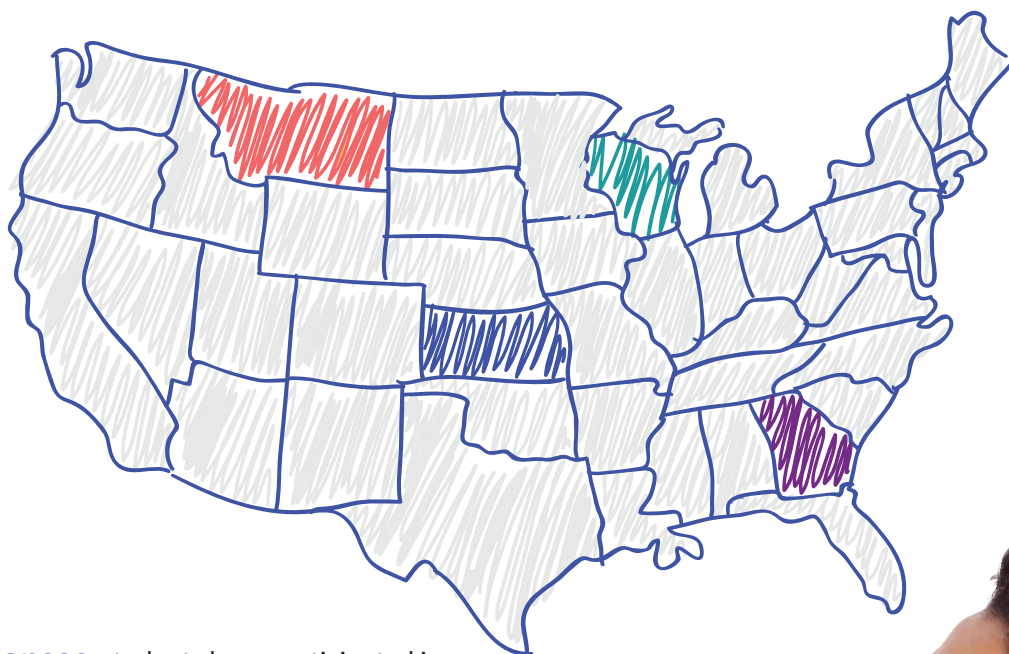


3. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study>



In **Montana**, schools led **Let's Eat**, a program where students help identify and make simple changes in the cafeteria to “nudge” their fellow students to make healthier choices. Examples of changes include creating attractive fruit displays, changing the placement of food items on the serving line, and coming up with creative names for menu items.

**Wisconsin** has been hosting the **Whipping Up Wellness Student Chef Competition** every year since 2012. Teams of middle and high school students compete to create healthy, student-approved recipes. Each year, five winning recipes are selected and taste-tested in schools throughout the State. These recipes are then added to the State recipe book and the recipes are submitted to the USDA for inclusion on a national recipe website.



In **Kansas**, students have participated in a **Kansas Statewide Recipe Challenge** where they team with a school nutrition professional, local farmer/producer, a Family and Consumer Science Educator to develop recipes using local ingredients. These recipes are making their way to school lunch trays across the State.

In **Georgia**, students and school nutrition staff teamed up to develop recipes as part of **Fueling Georgia's Future Student Chef Competition**. Teams competed to develop recipes that used Georgia-grown ingredients such as blueberries, mustard greens, and Vidalia onions. The result? New school menu offerings that used local foods and tasted great.



## PART 3: MEETING THE SCHOOL NUTRITION DIRECTOR

Mr. Rivera set up a meeting between Ava and Jayden and their school nutrition director, Mrs. Russo. They met at their school cafeteria and asked her their questions.

“Jayden and I talked to students around school, and we have some questions about lunch,” said Ava. “Can our school get a salad bar?”

“That’s a great idea, but there would be a few challenges,” replied Mrs. Russo. “We need enough staff to prepare all the salad bar foods and keep refreshing them during lunch. Our staff schedule makes that hard, and we would need to train staff to be successful. Also, this school doesn’t have enough refrigerator space to hold all that food. We are still working on adding a salad bar, but it will take time.”

“What about having more strawberries? Some students said they were tired of the same fruits.”

“That’s another great idea! We do get strawberries from a local farm in April and May. But we would have to get strawberries from far away during the rest of the year, and that can be expensive. We get less than \$4.00 per lunch we serve from the USDA, but this also pays for supplies, equipment, staff, training, and transportation costs. We have to be very careful of food costs, but I can try.”

“We saw a lot of plate waste in our school, and we read that students in other schools have helped to change their menus. We think that some small changes might reduce plate waste at this school. Is there anything we can do?”



4. [www.fns.usda.gov/tn/recipes-healthy-kids-cookbook-schools](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/recipes-healthy-kids-cookbook-schools)  
[www.theicn.org/cnrb/#allrecipes](http://www.theicn.org/cnrb/#allrecipes)

“You really did your homework! What if I found a new recipe that we can try at this school? We could arrange a taste test with students.”

“That would be great. We have students from all over the world at this school. Could we serve some food from different cultures?”

“Absolutely!” said Mrs. Russo. “There are great resources<sup>4</sup> with recipes for school lunch from many cultures. I need to make sure the foods we serve count as a fruit, vegetable, grain, and/or a meat or meat alternate, and that we have the staff, space, time, and equipment to serve it. I will find a recipe if you help me run a taste test.”

“Deal!” they said.

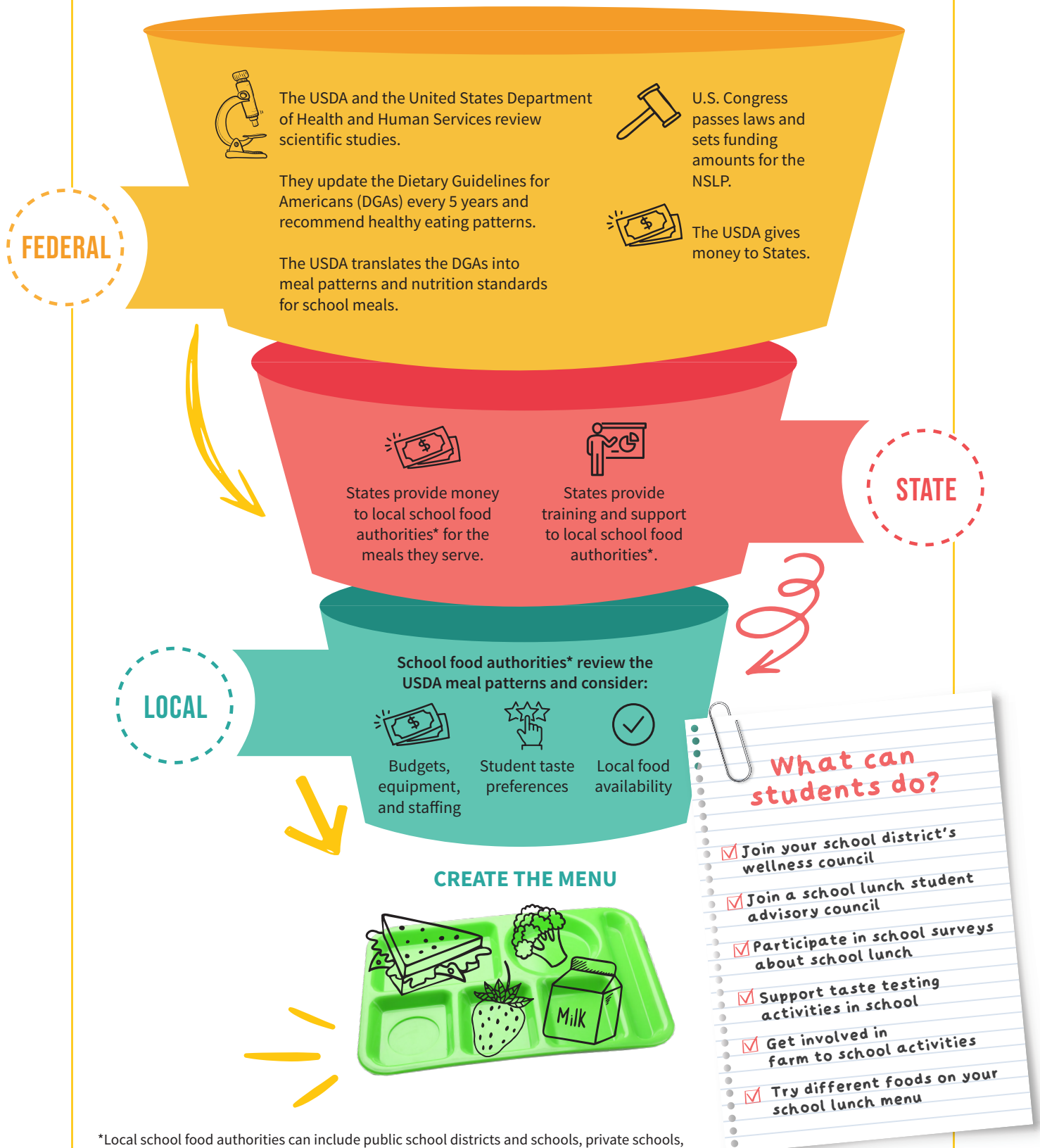
“Great. In case you have any other questions, I created a diagram that explains more about the School Lunch Program.” Mrs. Russo handed them a page titled, *How Lunch Menus Are Made in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)*.

“Talk to you soon!”





## How Lunch Menus Are Made in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)



# QUICK BREAK TO TALK ABOUT SCIENCE AND NUTRITION



I'm Teresa, and I'm a dietitian. As you now know, schools that participate in the NSLP are required by law to serve meals that are consistent with the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) (DGAs), which are national recommendations based on the latest nutrition science. These guidelines recommend healthy eating patterns that will help kids learn, grow, and be healthy.

Congress gives USDA the responsibility to establish the meal pattern based on DGAs. Schools play an important role in making sure children and teens get the nutrition they need during the day. School lunches also have to meet average weekly amounts for calories (energy), saturated fat, and sodium (salt).



Meal Component	Minimum per day for grades 6-8	Minimum per week for grades 6-8
Fruits	½ cup	2½ cup
Vegetables*	¾ cup	3¾ cup
Grains**	1 ounce equivalent	8-10 ounce equivalents
Meats and Meat Alternates	1 ounce equivalent	9-10 ounce equivalents
Milk	1 cup	5 cups

\*Schools must serve vegetables from each of the vegetable sub-groups (dark-green, red and orange, beans and peas, starchy, and other vegetables) each week.

\*\*Grains offered as part of school meals must be made with a certain amount of whole grains.



The meal pattern requirements are one reason the pizza served during your school lunch is different than the frozen pizza you get at home or the pizza from restaurants. The crust is whole grain and the cheese may be lower in saturated fat or sodium. The pizza was developed specifically for schools to meet these requirements.

Schools often offer multiple choices at lunch. What you choose on the lunch line and what you eat can make a big difference. If you choose to eat foods from each of the meal components (fruits, vegetables, meats and meat alternates, grains, and milk), you will be more likely to eat all of the nutrients you need to be healthy and strong, such as calcium for strong bones, potassium for healthy blood pressure, vitamin C for wound healing, fiber for digestive health, and more. The *School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study*<sup>5</sup> found that school lunches are more nutritious and more likely to follow the DGAs than lunches that came from other sources.

Remember the vegetables, milk, and fruits that students are throwing away? Well, when you throw out those foods, you're also throwing out important nutrients.

**Let's get back to Ava and Jayden and see what they are doing with their school menus.**

5. [www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study](http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-nutrition-and-meal-cost-study)



## PART 4: AVA AND JAYDEN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

It took some work, but Ava and Jayden coordinated with Mrs. Russo, the school food service team, and a chef from a local Mexican restaurant to review and practice preparing a new recipe called Marinated Black Bean Salad. They even got a local farm to provide the peppers.

On the day of the taste test, parents and teachers were all invited to school to try the Marinated Black Bean Salad. The food service staff made a sample batch of the recipe, and Ava and Jayden helped give out samples.

Ava and Jayden asked 50 people to sample the recipe and fill out a survey about how the recipe made them feel, how it smells, how it tasted, and how it looked. (Find more information on taste testing by following the QR code.)



Good Average Bad

(1) the food made me feel...

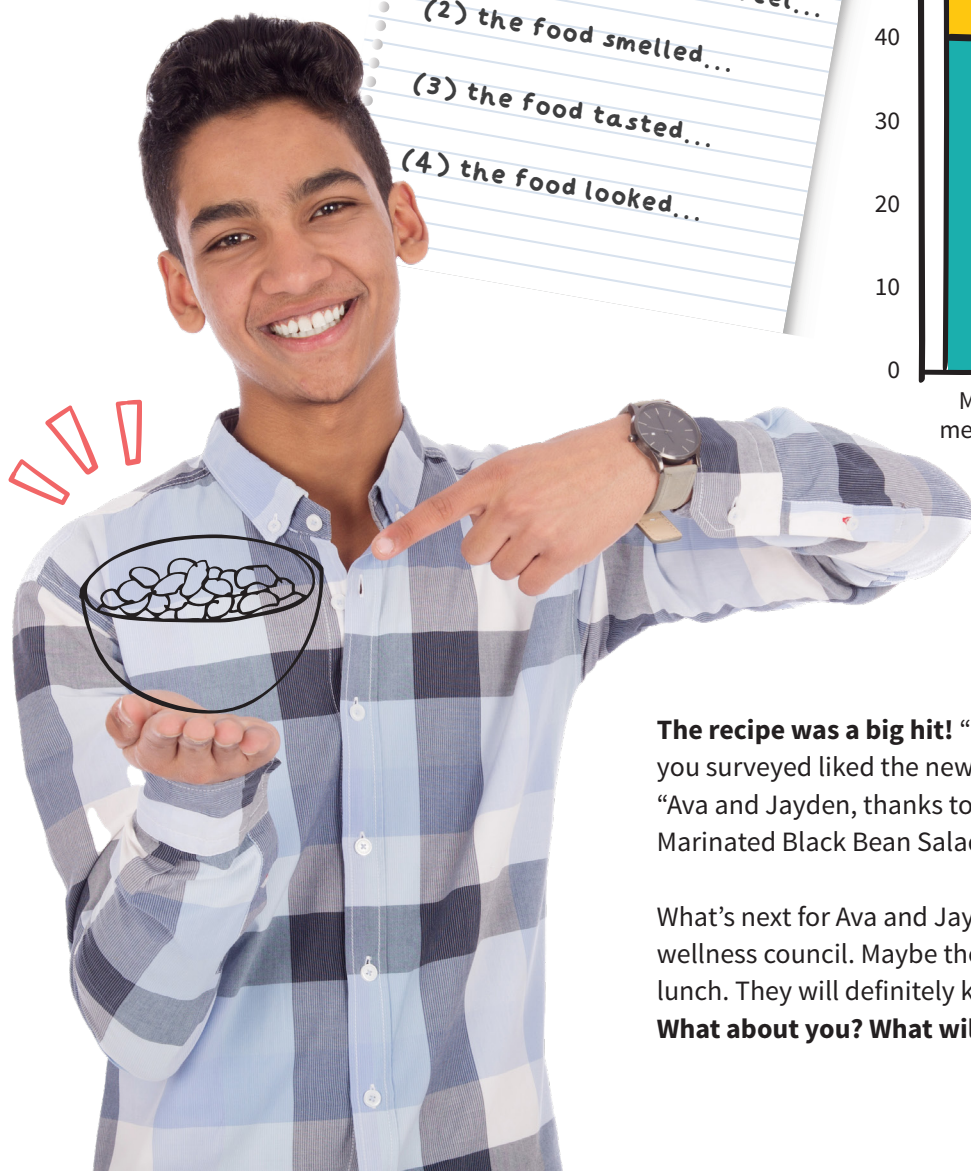
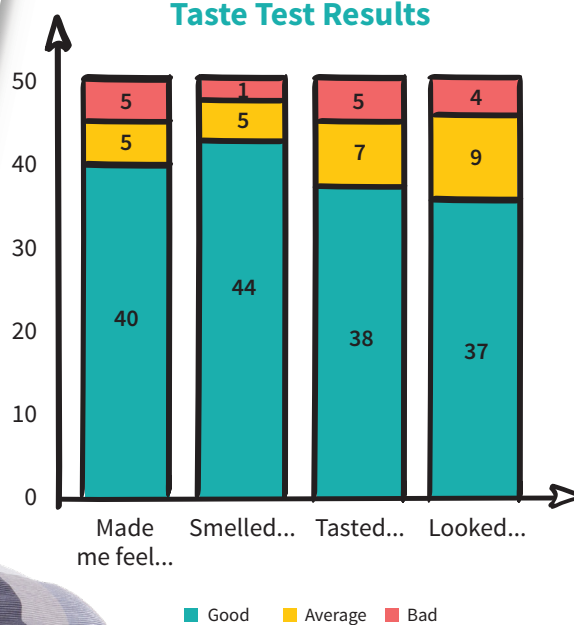
(2) the food smelled...

(3) the food tasted...

(4) the food looked...

THE RECIPE  
WAS A  
BIG HIT!

Taste Test Results



**The recipe was a big hit!** “Well, it looks like most of the students you surveyed liked the new recipe!” exclaimed Mrs. Russo. “Ava and Jayden, thanks to your hard work and perseverance, Marinated Black Bean Salad is officially on the school menu!”

What’s next for Ava and Jayden? Maybe they will join the district wellness council. Maybe they can support a school survey about lunch. They will definitely keep trying new foods served at lunch.

**What about you? What will you do?**

## CONCLUSION: WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO?

School lunch provides important nutrients that students need to learn, grow, and be healthy. There are many factors that influence what foods end up on the school lunch menu, such as nutrition requirements, kitchen equipment, staffing, budget, and student food preferences. Schools can plan meals to reflect different eating styles (such as being vegetarian) as well as cultural and regional food preferences. There are many ways for students to have a voice in what's for lunch. Here are five ways to get started:

- ✓ 1. Join your school district's wellness council. The wellness council is in charge of creating your school's Local School Wellness Policy. This policy provides guidelines on foods available at school and creating a healthy environment. Contact your school nutrition director to see if there is a council, who is in charge, and how you can get involved. Remember your school nutrition director's name and contact information is listed on the school district's website where they post school lunch information.
  - ✓ 2. Join a school lunch student advisory council. If your school district does not have one, ask your school nutrition director or cafeteria staff in your school if you can help start a student food council or advisory council. Your team can organize taste tests, request new menu items, and work with the staff to implement new ideas.
  - ✓ 3. Participate in school surveys about school lunch. If your school does not have this type of survey, ask your school nutrition director or cafeteria staff if they can work with you to create one.
  - ✓ 4. Support taste testing activities in school. Reach out to your school nutrition director or cafeteria staff in your school to see if you can help with any upcoming student tasting activities. Students can often help with creating, administering, or analyzing student surveys and feedback during tasting events.
  - ✓ 5. Get involved in farm to school activities. Farm to School Programs aim to connect schools with local farms to bring local foods to the school menu and provide nutrition education opportunities.
- Learn more at: [www.fns.usda.gov/cfs](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cfs).**

## STUDENT ASSESSMENT/READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What ideas in this article confirmed, challenged, or changed your thinking about school lunch?
2. Imagine a friend or family member asked you about what factors influence school decisions on what to serve at school lunch. Provide three important pieces of information that you feel should be shared.
3. How would you explain the difference between meal pattern and meal component?
4. Name two things your school nutrition director needs to consider when planning a school lunch menu.
5. Detail three ways you can work with your school nutrition director and cafeteria manager to implement positive changes to your school lunch menu.

Check out additional Fueling My Healthy Life materials here:

[www.fns.usda.gov/tn/fueling-my-healthy-life](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/fueling-my-healthy-life)

