USDA Food and Nutrition Administration
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

THE REAL FOOD GUIDE TO SCHOOL LUNCH FOR FAMILIES

Eat Real Food

School meals include whole, healthy foods that give kids the right balance of nutrients, while reducing added sugars and sodium.

Fruits

Every school lunch includes fruit. Only half of the fruits offered may be 100% juice, since whole and cut-up fruits have more fiber.

Milk

Kids and teens need the calcium, protein, and vitamin D found in milk for strong bones, teeth and muscles.

Vegetables

A variety of vegetables helps kids get the nutrients and fiber they need for good health.

Grains

Whole grains give kids and teens B vitamins, minerals, and fiber to help them feel fuller longer so they stay alert to concentrate at school.

Protein Foods

Meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, peas, eggs, nuts, and seeds provide many nutrients including protein and iron. Portion sizes are based upon the nutrition needs of children in various grade groups. School meals also allow cheese, tofu, and yogurt to count as the meat/meat alternate in the school lunch.

Visit **fna.usda.gov/teamnutrition** for additional tips and activities.

HOW DOES SCHOOL LUNCH Help Families?

Provides a balanced meal

It meets one-third of the nutrition needs of most children for the day.

Helps kids learn where foods come from

Farm to school programs are in 74 percent of schools, which increase kids' access to locally produced foods and learning activities, such as farmers' visits and school gardening.

Saves time

If you spend 10 minutes a day packing lunch, that adds up to 30 hours (1,800 minutes) each school year.

Supports learning at school

Research shows that kids with healthier eating patterns have better academic performance.

"We grow fruits and vegetables in our school greenhouse, which are harvested and given to the cafeteria to serve on the salad bar. It's great because the landscaping class gets involved, the leadership classes get involved, and even all the marketing plan classes get involved."

-Nebraska student

How can families help their children enjoy school lunch?

1. Try new foods at home. Kids need many opportunities to taste a new food to "get used to it."
2. Talk with your child about what's on the menu. Make sure he or she knows about all the foods that are included in his or her school lunch.
3. Eat lunch at school with your child. Learn more about what's offered and meet school nutrition staff.
4. Encourage your child or teen to join in taste-testing events or surveys about school lunch, when available.

The Dietary Guidelines offer recommendations for healthy eating and serve as the foundation for federal nutrition programs and policies, including school meal programs. You can explore the 2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines at **RealFood.gov**.

The National School Lunch Program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools—including charter schools—and residential child care institutions. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day.

Learn more at **www.fna.usda.gov/nslp**

FNA-632
August 2016 | Slightly Revised August 2026
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