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Where do we start?

How to tackle school meals 101

By Laura Brainin-Rodriguez MPH, MS, RD

You have taken a long look at the menu your school aged child brought home and are shocked to discover they serve food you would typically find at a county fair! Monday brings hot dogs, Tuesday dishes up pizza, Wednesday is chicken nuggets or a breaded chicken sandwich, Thursday offers a cheeseburger and Friday it's spaghetti with a tomato and ground meat sauce.

Where do you start trying to improve a menu like this? The goals of feeding children are to support their optimal growth and development and feed their brains. You are also hoping to create healthy habits that last a lifetime. The foods above would make these pretty daunting.

The critical issue is that many of the foods mentioned above can be perfectly wholesome if cooked from good ingredients in healthful ways. One example is pizza, which can be a whole grain platform for vegetables and lean protein. Chicken nuggets covered with whole wheat crumbs, made with white meat, and baked instead of fried, are a quick and tasty meal. Cheeseburger that uses lean beef and real cheese offers body building protein and bone building calcium. The pasta offered can be whole wheat and the sauce can be full of pureed vegetables and also use lean ground turkey or beef. The real problem is that most school food budgets rarely have the resources to make these foods in their healthier version.

So the task begins with asking some questions. What kind of meat is being used for the cheeseburger and spaghetti sauce? Does anyone know the fat content and grade of the meat? Meat is classified or graded as Prime, Choice, Select, Standard, Commercial and Utility. These are in descending order less tender, have less marbling (fat distributed within the muscle) and come from more mature animals. The likely grades used in an institutional setting are Standard and Commercial. That in itself is not a bad thing, since typically this is ground meat, where the age and tenderness are less critical.

Most school meal programs use USDA commodity meat, which is available to them at little to no cost. Ideally, the cooking method should allow for rendering fat as it cooks, rather than having the meat added, fat and all, to the chili, meat sauce or other dishes it is part of. In reviewing the [Commodity Food Fact Sheets](#), under Meat/Meat Substitutes, the highest amount of fat in most Commodity Ground Beef products is 15-18%, which is lower than that found in Lean Ground Beef at a supermarket which can be up to 22%.

Make sure they are using 100% beef. What you want to be on the lookout for is the use of Soy Protein Product, or SSP, mixed in with the beef. I will write an article in the future on the problems with soy foods, but will mention a few concerns now. These include that the processing of soy forms MSG (more below); phytates in soy decrease the body's uptake of calcium, iron and zinc; it contains compounds that suppress the thyroid; and it can often produce allergic reactions. The only reason it is there is to stretch the ground meat, crumbles or patty, reducing the amount of meat, while keeping the portion sizes the same.

What kind of chicken is in the chicken nuggets, or chicken sandwiches? Is it whole chicken or ground up mystery meat and bones? The "chicken patties, burger style" listed in the Commodity Foods Fact Sheets include the Soy Protein Product. You would be better off with them using canned chicken, diced frozen chicken or chicken fajita strips which are made from 100% chicken; all are available as commodities. Is there a dipping sauce for the nuggets, or condiment sauce for the sandwich, and what is in it? You would not want the first ingredient to be sugar, or high fructose corn syrup, or for it to be loaded with artificial colors and flavors.

What kind of toppings are in the pizza? Ideally these should be vegetables, cheese, ham or lean meats, rather than high fat pepperoni or sausage.

Do the pizza dough, spaghetti or chicken nugget or patty breading use whole grains? What about the bun for the chicken sandwich and the cheeseburger? Whole grains have more fiber, B-vitamins and minerals, and are for this reason more filling and nutritious.

As you already know from reading [How to make friends with your nutrition services director](#), it is best to ask your questions in a friendly and non-threatening manner. You just want to learn, not attack your already over taxed Food Service Director or staff for not offering better choices. As a society, we have systematically underfunded school food for decades, and changing what is offered will take time.

You may want to tackle first the worst offenders out of the choices being given. Among the menu choices mentioned above, the worst one is probably the hot dog, or its awful cousin, corn dogs. Not only are these usually full of whatever is left over during the butchering of an animal, including spare fat, but they often add artificial flavors, colors and MSG to mask their real taste.

There is no known benefit to the use of artificial colors, as these are typically derived from petrochemicals and have been associated with allergic reactions and behavioral problems in some children. This research was enough to alarm regulatory agencies in the UK and lead them to banning many of these artificial colors. These types of ingredients are usually found in foods of low nutrient quality such as highly sugared cereals, high fat chips, cookies and pastries which contribute little to the nutritional wellbeing of any child. They are intended to trick our senses and keep them from telling us these foods are lacking in flavor and goodness for us.

Other ingredients to avoid include nitrates used to keep hot dogs and cured meats looking pink. These are changed to nitrosamines in our digestive tract and these are carcinogenic. MSG or monosodium glutamate is added to foods to trick our palate into thinking that food has more

flavor than it really does. It is an excitatory neurotoxin, which harms our brains and contributes to headaches in many.

Working with your Nutrition or Wellness Committee to support your Food Service Director in finding alternatives to serving hot dogs would be a good place to begin. Being their advocate in getting the most eligible students enrolled in the school lunch program, and in maximizing the amount in their budget available for food, would be essential parts of this process too, since good food does cost real money.

Once you get traction on the hot dogs, the next thing to tackle could be the kind of chicken meat used in the chicken nuggets and patties, or the type of beef used in the burger and spaghetti sauce. You can also tackle the use of whole grains used in the pizza dough and pasta.

The bottom-line is that whole foods are better for us than those which are processed and refined. The closer a food is to its original form, that is, a potato (baked, boiled, or mashed) instead of potato chips or instant potatoes, the more nutrition, fiber and even staying power in our bodies. Whole fruit will trump juice and smoothies. By promoting a wide variety of culturally varied foods, that have thousands of years of trial and error behind them, we can help build healthy bodies in children and adults.

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