

CHOICES



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THEME OVERVIEW: WEIGHING HEALTHY CHOICES FOR THE SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM

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The National School Lunch Program touches the lives of almost all school children in the United States today. The lunch program is available in 99% of U.S. public schools and 83% of private and public schools combined. In addition, the School Breakfast Program is available in 85% of public schools. For children who participate in the breakfast and lunch program, the school meal setting offers nearly half of the meals they consume during a week. In 2007, the school lunch program served over 30 million school children in a day.

The primary source of funding is through federal reimbursement to school districts for free and reduced-price meals. In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides commodities to states for use in school lunches. In some areas, state and local governments also provide some subsidies or support for the meal programs. The investment made in the programs holds the potential to provide nearly all school children nutritious, low-cost meals to support growth, development, and health and build the foundation for healthy eating habits. The school meal programs are scheduled for reauthorization within the next year, so now is the time to address the current challenges of providing and paying for healthful meals to meet students' needs.

At the request of USDA, the Institute of Medicine undertook a study of the meal programs and the food and nutritional needs of school-aged children. The study committee used the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and up-to-date scientific evidence on the diets of school-aged children to make recommendations for changes in the meal programs. The recommendations include a new focus on increasing fruits and vegetables and whole-grain-rich foods, and reducing the amounts of saturated fat and sodium. In addition, the committee recommended establishing meal plans with a range of calories (with expressed minimum and maximum amounts), and moving away from the current minimum calorie requirement. In fact, the recommendations are consistent with a growing body of research, as well as encouragement from stakeholder groups to change the school meals to be consistent with the dietary needs of school children today.

The articles in this theme address several dimensions of the school meals program that are important to the ongoing deliberations on school meal policies. Guthrie and co-authors provide an outline of the school meal programs and their role today in meeting the needs of school children. They summarize recent findings on how the programs measure up in terms of student participation, diet quality, and food security. Peterson examines the role of commodity programs for school meals. Research from Minnesota provides evidence on the use and cost of commodities by the school system and is used to support recommendations to improve the financing of foods for the meals program. Ghosh and Senauer consider the issue of how reimbursement rates are set and applied to reimburse schools for the cost of free and reduced-price meals. Wilde and Kennedy focus on the financial side of providing food and the challenge to the school food system of meeting cost constraints. School systems face important decisions about funding and the school food environment. Finally, Just and Wansink offer insight from behavioral economics that suggests opportunities to address the competing goals of improving nutrition and meeting the cost of the meals. Interventions that help trigger healthy food choices in the lunchroom can make adjustments in the meals effective tools to improve student health. Key to their contribution are clues as to what works well in the school setting to improve school food choices and what does not. Through the range of topics covered in these articles on the school meal program and setting, the reader gains an appreciation for the challenges—and opportunities—involved in

improving the meal offerings in schools.

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