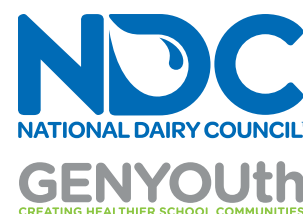


The Value of School Meal Programs



Help create awareness of the nutritional quality of school meals and encourage participation by all children in school meal programs.

Overview

School meals contribute significantly to the health and well-being of our nation's youth and in the lives of families and communities. The nutritional quality of school meals and their consistency with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans make them a vital resource for millions of children. Nearly 30 million students rely on school meals daily,¹ but participation plummeted 30% during the pandemic² and schools are struggling to recover. There is a need to inform the public of the nutritional quality of school meals and their critical role in nourishing future generations.

Supporting Research

- Between 2003 and 2018, foods consumed at schools improved significantly and provided the best mean diet quality of major U.S. food sources, without population disparities.³
- Between the 2009-2010 and 2014-2015 school year, the Healthy Eating Index score of school breakfast increased by 42% and lunch increased 41%.⁴
- Children who participate in school meals consume more dairy milk, fruits and vegetables than non-participants and they consume fewer desserts, snacks and non-milk beverages.⁵
- School meals provide 77% of daily dairy milk consumption for low-income children.⁶
- Flavored dairy milk is a good or excellent source of the same 13 essential nutrients as dairy milk, including calcium, vitamin D and potassium – nutrients of public health concern that are lacking in the diets of many students.
- Flavored milk contributes only 4% of added sugars in the diets of children 2-18 years⁷ and flavored milk consumption is not associated with an increased BMI.⁸

Key Points and Statistics

- The nutritional quality of school meals and their consistency with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans makes them a vital resource for our nation's children.
- Thirty million children rely on school meals daily¹ and participation plummeted during the pandemic,² leaving kids in need without access to nutritious meals.
- Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the children who participate in school meals receive them at a free or reduced-price – underscoring that they are reaching those who are most vulnerable.¹

- Innovative approaches like grab-and-go carts and smoothie programs have increased student engagement and participation in school meals.
- Children who eat school meals are more likely to consume dairy milk, fruits and vegetables compared to students who eat lunches elsewhere.⁵
- Children who eat school meals consume fewer desserts and snacks than non-participants.⁵
- School breakfast helps nourish children who are most at-risk for food insecurity,¹ providing them a vital support for mood, attention and cognition.⁹

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