SCHOOL NUTRITION: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CONNECTICUT’S FUTURE

Hundreds of thousands of children in Connecticut depend on school meals for daily nutrition.

1 in 6 children in Connecticut live in food insecure households.

Child nutrition programs are a first line of defense against hunger and play a crucial role in health promotion and disease prevention.

School Nutrition Professionals are proud to serve nutritious and delicious meals in Connecticut.

- School meals provide age appropriate portions of fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grains and lean protein.\(^1\)

- School breakfast meets 1/4 the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of vitamins and minerals and lunch 1/3 the RDA, while limiting calories, fat, and sodium, playing a crucial role in health promotion and chronic disease prevention.

- Through community partnerships, wellness committees, and using locally grown products, school nutrition programs encourage healthy food access and nutrition education in the community.

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\(^1\) Based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans
• Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life and is a reality for many children. In Connecticut, 1 in 8 people – and 1 in 6 children – live in food insecure households.
  
  o **12.2% of households were food insecure** in 2017 – almost 450,000 Connecticut residents.
  o 40% of Connecticut’s households have incomes that are below the level needed to pay for basic necessities.²

• There are links between food insecurity, malnutrition and being overweight.
• An estimated one-third of Connecticut’s youth are overweight or obese.
• Malnutrition – the deficiency, excesses or imbalance in a person’s intake of energy and/or nutrients – is a real problem across the U.S., as well as right here in Connecticut.
  
  o Nutrients that are considered of public health concern for under-nutrition include vitamin D, calcium, potassium and fiber.³
  o Nutrients consumed in amounts below the Estimated Average Requirement, or Adequate Intake Level, include: potassium, dietary fiber, choline, magnesium, calcium and vitamins A, D, E, and C. Iron is also under-consumed by adolescent girls. This is due to limited intakes of vegetables, fruits, whole grains and dairy.
  
  o **School breakfast and lunch meals help to provide these essential nutrients.**

² United Way ALICE report, 2018
³ Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015 – 2020
• The School Breakfast Program is an essential resource for students, schools, families, and communities, providing access to the most important meal of the day.

• A hungry mind cannot learn on an empty stomach. School Breakfast keeps kids nourished so they can flourish.

• Schools make nutritious and delicious meals available at low to no cost to students through the federal School Breakfast Program and receive reimbursement from the federal and state governments to help support their programs.

• Students who skip breakfast are more likely to have lower math scores, reduced cognitive functioning, slower memory recall and are more likely to repeat a grade.

• Eating breakfast at school has been shown to: improve concentration, alertness, and comprehension of the material; assist with faster completion of math problems; result in better performance on standardized tests; increase math and reading scores; and improve speed and memory in cognitive tests.

• A social impact analysis on the federal School Breakfast Program (SBP) demonstrated that students who participate in School Breakfast attend 1.5 more days of school annually, score 17.5 percent higher on math tests and are less likely to have disciplinary problems.

• A study by the University of Connecticut also proved that having a second breakfast at school in addition to home does not contribute to obesity.

• **Connecticut has made great strides in schools offering School Breakfast over the past four years, but still has a lot of room to grow.**
  o Prior to the School Year 2014 – 2015, Connecticut ranked last in the nation (51st including DC) for 11 consecutive years for the number of schools offering School Breakfast that otherwise offered School Lunch.
  o School Year 2014-2015, Connecticut was ranked 47th.
  o School Year 2015-2016, CT dropped back to 49th.
  o School Year 2016-2017, CT rose to its highest ranking ever of 45th in the nation.
• The best way to serve school breakfast is in a way that makes it as accessible as possible to as many students as possible. Models like Breakfast After the Bell and Grab and Go that allow students to eat in their classrooms while instructional activities are underway have proven to reach the most students with the nutritious breakfast they need to succeed.

SCHOOL MEALS

School meals are the backbone to the school day. Not only do school meals create access to healthy, nutritious food to support student learning and success, but they provide a critical social opportunity for students to grow and thrive. The federal school meals programs, such as: School Breakfast, School Lunch, After School Snacks, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Community Eligibility Provision, and the Special Milk Program provide students with access to nutritional supports while enabling schools and districts to access much needed funding.

• For students that rely on school meals throughout the school year, extended breaks from school can be tough. Schools play a critical role in making sure that students have access to nutritious food - even when school is out.

Programs such as the Summer Meals Programs, the Child and Adult Care Food Program’s At-Risk After School Meals Programs (Suppers), and After School Snacks all serve essential roles in making sure that children don’t go hungry over extended school break times. They have access to the building blocks of nutrition that they need to develop on track, retain their education, and come back to school ready to thrive.

• School meals stimulate the economy through purchasing food from farmers, processors, and food vendors and employing people to work in food services.

• Connecticut schools pride themselves on offering fresh and locally grown foods and have cultivated strong partnerships with farmers throughout the state.

Nutritional Guidelines

• School meals nourish students throughout the school day and help assure that all children in Connecticut come to class “ready to learn.”

• School meals offered are consistent with the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- To receive federal reimbursements, school meal programs must meet very strict federal nutrition standards. These standards, also referred to as “the meal pattern,” require school-based child nutrition programs to offer students age-appropriate portions with a healthy balance of fruits, vegetables, low-fat or fat-free milk, whole grains and lean proteins.

- Nutrition standards limit calories, sodium, and fat, playing a crucial role in health promotion and chronic disease prevention.

**Diverse Offerings/Choice**

- School meals are naturally nutrient rich, flavorful and offer a vast variety of choices.

- Talented and dedicated staff throughout our state take great pride in preparing and serving the very best to students. Within the framework of the federal child nutrition programs, each district designs their school menus, incorporating their student’s favorites.

- School menus often reflect the rich cultural heritage of their students and include freshly made meals that are local to communities. Vegetarian and reduced carbon footprint foods such as edamame, hummus and legume salads with fresh herbs are also regular menu features.

**Farm to School**

- Many Connecticut districts are embracing the local foods movement by partnering with local farms and vendors to serve foods grown and produced in and around the state.

- **Fifty-nine school districts** have taken the *Put Local on Your Tray* Pledge, committing to source, serve, and celebrate locally sourced ingredients for school meals.

- Farm to School extends beyond school meals to hands-on classroom education and school garden activities, teaching students where food comes from, and empowering them to develop lifelong healthy eating behaviors.

**Increased Access to School Meals**

- The federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) provides an alternative approach for eligible schools and districts to provide free, nutritious breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost while eliminating requirements to collect school meals applications.
• **Currently, 307** eligible schools in 37 districts are taking advantage of this program, leading to increased student participation in school meals, decreased stigma, and less administrative burden on schools and households.

*Self-Sufficiency/Funding*

• Per USDA regulations, School Nutrition programs are required to operate separately from the school district budget. Breakfast and lunch meals are funded by federal reimbursements, meal and a la carte sales, as well as a required state match.

• In a recent survey conducted by the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut (SNACT), more than half of the respondents were requiring subsidies from their local Board of Education to cover their expenses. This often means an increase in lunch prices, making it even more difficult for many struggling families that don’t quite meet the strict federal eligibility guidelines for free or reduced price meals.

• To qualify for free school meals, a household’s *gross annual income* (before taxes) must be at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). If even a penny more, the students will not be eligible for free school meals.
  ○ For a family of two (parent/guardian and child), the annual *gross* income cannot exceed $21,398.
  ○ For a family of three, annual gross income must be below $27,014.
  ○ For a family of four, annual gross income must be below $32,630.

• To qualify for reduced price school meals, a household’s *gross annual income* must be between 130% - 185% of the FPL.
  ○ Family of two, annual gross income must be below $30,451.
  ○ Family of three, annual gross income must be below $38,443.
  ○ Family of four, annual gross income must be below $46,435.

• The household annual survival budget for a family of four living in Connecticut is $77,832.⁴

• Income thresholds to qualify for free or reduced price school meals are the same income threshold no matter where you live in the nation; Connecticut, New York City, Mississippi, Wyoming, or California.

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Wellness Policies

- Per USDA, each LEA (local educational agency) is required to develop a local school wellness policy that promotes students’ health, well-being and ability to learn by supporting healthy eating and physical activity.

- Parents, students, representatives of the food service program, physical education teachers, school health professionals, the school board, school administrators and the general public are all invited to participate in the development, implementation, review and update of the wellness policy.

- Required components of the wellness policy include: specific goals for nutrition promotion, education and physical activity, nutrition guidelines for all foods and beverages available on the school campus, policies for other foods and beverages available on the school campus during the school day, and policies for food and beverage marketing.

Community Partnerships & Wellness

- Throughout CT, school food service departments are increasingly becoming hubs for healthy food access and education throughout the school and broader community. Such initiatives include: hosting community dinners to create a place for families and community members to gather and share a meal; organizing SNAP outreach events to make families aware of benefits; and leading health and wellness efforts like fairs, promotions, and recipe contests.

Professional Standards

- In 2015, USDA established minimum professional standard requirements for school nutrition professionals who manage, operate or work in school nutrition programs. The standards ensure that school nutrition professionals have the knowledge, training and tools they need to plan, prepare and purchase healthy products to create nutritious, safe and enjoyable school meals.

- USDA’s Professional Standards Rule establishes a minimum requirement for annual continuing education/training for all school nutrition professionals.

- Minimum educational hiring standards for Food Service Directors have also been established.

- Many Food Service Directors are Registered Dietitians and/or School Nutrition Specialists. A School Nutrition Specialist is an expert in the field of Child Nutrition Programs and has passed a national credentialing program from the national School Nutrition Association.