

Meeting School Meals Initiative Requirements with Farm to School

Introduction

What is the School Meals Initiative?

Since 1995, the School Meals Initiative has helped foodservice directors and staff offer healthier meals and promote nutrition education to support healthy lifestyle behaviors. It establishes a framework to plan and evaluate school meals using nutrition standards (based on Recommended Dietary Allowances for key nutrients), appropriate calorie levels, and recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. NSLP regulations require that breakfast and/or lunch menus, when averaged over a school week, meet the nutrient standards for the appropriate age or grade group. *Meeting these standards is the goal for all menu-planning options.* For more information about SMI requirements, refer to *FNS 303-A Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals*, and the *Road to SMI Success: A Guide for Local School Foodservice Directors* (this is still in draft).



What are the nutrition standards?

USDA School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children Nutrition Standards

- ***Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA)***
 - 1/4 RDA for age/grade group for breakfast for protein, calcium, iron, vitamins A and C
 - 1/3 RDA for age/grade group for lunch for protein, calcium, iron, vitamins A and C
- ***Recommended Energy Allowances (calories)***
 - Appropriate for age/grade group
- ***Dietary Guidelines for Americans***
 - Eat a variety of foods.
 - Limit total fat to $\leq 30\%$ of calories.
 - Limit saturated fat to $<10\%$ of calories.
 - Choose a diet low in cholesterol.
 - Choose a diet with plenty of vegetables, fruits and grain products.
 - Choose a diet moderate in salt and sodium.

How can Farm to School help schools meet the nutrition goals?

Farm to School links schools with local growers to supply more fruits and vegetables for children to enjoy as part of school meals.

USDA recommends that meals include:

- a vitamin A-rich vegetable or fruit at least 2-3 times a week;
- a vitamin C-rich vegetable or fruit 3-4 times a week, and breakfasts include them frequently;
- a variety of vegetables and fruits;
- foods that are good sources of fiber, such as fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grain products.

Iron, Vitamins A and C, fiber, and phytochemicals found in fruits and vegetables play an important role in optimal health, and protection against chronic diseases. Offering a wide variety of fruits and vegetables also supports the DGA recommendations.

Planning menus that offer more fresh fruits and vegetables

Planning menus involves much more than listing which foods you offer each day. As you evaluate your current menus, keep in mind these basic principles: (see Menu Planner for Healthy School meals, Chapter 4.)

- **Balance:** Flavors, textures, colors
- **Variety:** Cooked vs. raw, different shapes and textures, familiar and new foods
- **Choices:** Include regional and cultural preferences; let students choose.
- **Contrast:** Strive for contrasts of texture, flavor, and methods of preparation.
- **Color:** Use fruits and vegetables to add natural color to entrees, side dishes
- **Eye Appeal:** Offer fruits and vegetables in an attractive way on the serving line or salad bar. Use garnishes.

Which menu planning system do you use?

The requirements for meeting the nutrition standards will depend on whether you use a Food-based menu planning or nutrient-based menu planning system. At lunch, schools using food-based systems must offer at least 2 servings of different fruits or vegetables, with a total volume of at least $\frac{3}{4}$ cup, and a minimum $\frac{1}{8}$ cup portion size.

For schools using nutrient-standard menu planning, there is no minimum requirement; however, in order to meet the Dietary Guidelines goals, it is recommended to offer at least 2 different fruits/vegetables totaling at least $\frac{3}{4}$ cup. Remember, the goal is to increase the variety and amount of fruits and vegetables offered through school meals.

Other points to consider when offering more fruits and vegetables:

- **Product availability:** Use foods in season, at the peak of flavor and lowest cost. Offer fresh whenever possible.
- **Staffing and equipment:** Is there adequate refrigeration/freezer space? Do you have sufficient counter space, sinks and preparation equipment? What about serving tools and dishes or compartments in a compartment tray needed to serve each meal? Can employees prepare in the time available? How much hand preparation is required for each menu? Schedule employees' time so their particular skills can be used to best advantage. Balance the workload — food preparation and clean-up — from day to day and from week to week.
- **Use the Food Buying Guide** to plan adequate portion sizes – remember that the “as purchased” weight or volume is greater than the “as consumed” volume.
- **Know your customers:** Be sure to get input from students and staff when designing cycle menus.

Purchasing and Preparing Fruits and Vegetables²

Foods you serve can only be as good as the quality of the foods you purchase. Careful use of competitive buying will not only help control food costs but will also help upgrade the quality of your meals. Here are some additional tips...

- **Be familiar with sources of supply.** Buy from growers who provide the best quality food at the most reasonable prices. Seek out potential new suppliers. Put them on your mailing list for bids and requests for proposals. Also look for opportunities to buy through cooperative purchasing groups (co-ops).
- **Buy according to how you will use a product.** Consider grade, style, type, size, count, container, and packing medium. Develop clear, concise purchase specifications and food product descriptions. To ensure the purchase of quality foods at competitive prices, write specifications and descriptions that will make clear what you want and what you will accept. (Refer to First Choice and Choice Plus, NFSMI).
- **Inspect upon delivery.** Make sure what is delivered meets your specifications.
- **Remember storage facilities.** Decide when to buy each type of food, keeping in mind perishability and storage space.
- **Keep records of food purchases.**
- **Use standardized recipes, even for salad bars.**
- **Determine equipment needs.**
- **Balance workload and delivery schedules.**

² See Fruits and Vegetables Galore and NFSMI resources.

Marketing Fruits and Vegetables³

A promotion provides an excellent opportunity to introduce new menu items. But don't overdo it — show only one new fruit or vegetable item at a time. A total of two or three in a month is plenty! To make sure students notice:

- Make the new food item sound appealing on the printed menu.
- Offer an incentive — a reward for choosing the new food.
- Display a poster that lists the food's nutritive value. Look for resources from commodity groups such as Peach Growers, etc.
- Introduce new foods in the classroom or plan small portions when first offering a new food.

Strategies to Incorporate Farm to Cafeteria Programs

- **Salad Bars:** Showcase local foods in a salad bar as an alternative entrée choice or in combination with other entrees. One advantage of a salad bar is that local foods can be incorporated when available. Use colorful signs to help children choose enough.
- **Teacher Nutrition Education:** Serve local foods in the cafeteria that are featured in nutrition education curriculum in the classroom or school garden.
- **Main Dish Items:** Incorporate local foods in your favorite lunch entrees; and offer more vegetarian choices. For example, add color and crunch to pizza using green peppers, zucchini, etc.
- **Side Fruit/Vegetables:** Serve locally produced fruits or vegetables as a side dish for lunch. Locally produced fruits, such as apples, pears, berries or melons, can be served with cereal as a breakfast option.
- **Special Events:** Host a "Harvest Festival" in the cafeteria, showcasing many different locally produced foods at one event, or showcase one locally grown product each month. Introduce different foods to students and educate them about what foods are produced locally. Partner with teachers, health or agriculture groups which can provide resources and assist with marketing the event. Make the cafeteria the fun, "in" place to have lunch!



³ See Fruits and Vegetables Galore and Chapter 8 in Menu Planner.

Maximize your Nutritional Impact!

Vegetables High in Recommended Nutrients

	Iron	Vitamin A	Vitamin C
Best Sources	Beet greens, carrots, Swiss chard, red chili peppers, collards, dandelion greens, kale, mustard greens, peas and carrots, sweet red peppers, spinach, winter squash (acorn, butternut, Hubbard), pumpkin, sweet potatoes, turnip greens	Beet greens, carrots, Swiss chard, red chili peppers, collards, dandelion greens, kale, mustard greens, peas and carrots, sweet red peppers, spinach, winter squash (acorn, butternut, Hubbard), pumpkin, sweet potatoes, turnip greens	Broccoli, Brussels sprouts, sweet red and green peppers, red and green chili peppers
Good Sources	Broccoli, chicory greens	Broccoli, chicory greens	Cauliflower, collards, kale, kohlrabi, mustard greens, watercress
Other Sources	Green asparagus, green chili peppers (fresh), endive, escarole, tomatoes, tomato juice or reconstituted paste or puree	Green asparagus, green chili peppers (fresh), endive, escarole, tomatoes, tomato juice or reconstituted paste or puree	Asparagus, cabbage, dandelion greens, okra, potatoes (baked, boiled, or steamed), potatoes (reconstituted instant mashed/vitamin C restored), sauerkraut, spinach, sweet potatoes (not canned in syrup), tomatoes, tomato juice or reconstituted paste or puree, turnip greens, turnips

Fruits High in Recommended Nutrients

	Iron	Vitamin A	Vitamin C
Best Sources	Mangoes	Mangoes	Oranges, orange juice, papayas, guavas, kiwi
Good Sources	Apricots, cantaloupe, papayas, purple plums (canned).	Apricots, cantaloupe, papayas, purple plums (canned)	Grapefruit, grapefruit juice, grapefruit/orange juice, kumquats, mangoes, pineapple juice (canned/vitamin C restored), strawberries, tangerine juice, tangerines
Other Sources	Red sour cherries, nectarines, peaches (not canned), prunes.	Red sour cherries, nectarines, peaches (not canned), prunes	Cantaloupe, honeydew melon, raspberries, tangelos