Nutrition and Wellness
An Unbeatable Combination
In the war on childhood obesity, U.S. schools have found themselves on the front line—and under fire. Fueled by almost constant media scrutiny, the issue of child health has prompted decision-makers from local districts up to the federal government to question the nutritional value of various foods available in schools. The good news is that meals served by schools participating in the National School Lunch Program are healthy meals. The better news is that school nutrition professionals are continuing to improve the variety and nutritional value of lunchroom food. The best news is that principals now have a unique opportunity to work in partnership with school nutrition professionals to develop healthy school environments.

The childhood obesity crisis has focused attention on the importance of providing children with healthy choices in school food.

Ruth Jonen
School Nutrition Trends

Wellness policies are expected to have a significant impact on tomorrow’s school meals. However, they represent just one of several trends characterizing today’s school nutrition programs. Here’s a look at five others.

**School meals are healthier than ever.** Menus now include more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and skim and low-fat milk. Even the classic kids’ favorite—pizza—is coming up a nutritional winner. Many processed pizza varieties developed specifically for the school market feature whole grains incorporated into the crust, low-fat cheese, and lower-fat ground turkey used for toppings.

**Commodity foods have enjoyed an “extreme makeover.”** Schools receive greater variety and higher quality commodity foods provided by the federal government, which now applies higher standards to purchases of many commercially labeled products. In addition, school nutrition programs increasingly can turn to food manufacturers to process bulk commodity foods into familiar commercial products.

**Farm-to-school programs are gaining ground.** Although there is no single federal program or agency that oversees such initiatives, local communities and state organizations have used varying approaches to bring local produce into schools. For example, New York state law permits school districts to bypass the competitive bidding process when it comes to purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables directly from local farmers.

**School breakfasts are gaining ground.** They are served to more than 8 million children each day, but this pales in comparison to the nearly 29 million children who eat school lunch. Schedules have been a traditional barrier to school breakfast, but more principals are paying attention to research that affirms the strong link between academic achievement and eating breakfast at school. In some schools, breakfast is being served not only in the cafeteria, but also in the classroom and on the bus. “Grab-n-go” bagged meals also are offered in central locations or at school entrances.

**School meals enjoy the best food safety record of any foods eaten outside of the home.** But school nutrition professionals aren’t resting on their laurels. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act passed by Congress in 2004 includes food safety-related provisions endorsed by the School Nutrition Association. These now include a formal food safety plan that involves analyzing the specific food preparation steps of each individual menu item to identify and prevent potential health risks. In addition, the number of local health inspections of school foodservice operations has increased.

It’s no secret that we share the same goals. We want our students to succeed in academics and in life. We know that achievement depends on them being healthy and well nourished. We also share at least one common barrier to our goals: inadequate funds.

Rising costs and tightening budgets have led many district administrators, principals, food service managers, and parent-teacher organizations to use food sales as revenue sources, and we all know what sells well: high-fat, high-sugar, high-calorie processed snacks, sweets, and sodas. When schools enter into exclusive beverage vending contracts with soda companies, or stock la carte service lines with potato chips and ice cream, or use candy and baked good sales to raise money, they are sending students decidedly mixed messages about food and nutrition. **“One of the more novel approaches being explored in an increasing number of elementary schools today is to schedule recess before lunch.”**

How Principals Can Help

This unfortunate trend, combined with the hot spotlight on child health and obesity, led Congress to include a revolutionary mandate in the Child Nutrition and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act of 2004. By the beginning of the 2006–2007 school year, all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program must develop a school wellness policy that addresses nutrition education and provides guidelines for all foods available during the school day.

The law requires that teams representing a cross-section of the school community develop local school wellness policies. Although the majority of wellness policy teams around the country are in the early and middle stages of the process, principals and other school administrators are joining with school nutrition professionals to develop plans that reflect the specific needs of their individual communities.

There are a number of ways they can meet their shared goals:

**Think creatively about the daily schedule.** One of the most common complaints of students, parents, and school nutrition professionals is that kids don’t have enough time to eat breakfast or lunch at school. Many lunch periods
are too short to accommodate the number of students scheduled to eat. As facilities and budgets allow, schools are doing what they can to alleviate the problem by incorporating more service options, such as food bars, freestanding kiosks, and fast-food scramble stations. But in many cases, the only option is to lengthen the lunch period.

One of the more novel approaches being explored in an increasing number of elementary schools today is to schedule recess before lunch. Research has demonstrated that this arrangement has a positive impact on consumption of healthy school meals and academic performance.

Build relationships with key members of the school nutrition team. You may know the cafeteria manager in your school, but do you know the district’s foodservice director? If not, introduce yourself and seek out more information about the school nutrition operation—especially the challenges in regard to staffing as well as food purchases, distribution, and storage. Knowing more about the factors that influence menu decisions will help you to work with the school’s cafeteria staff in creating positive changes.

Support initiatives designed to boost school meal participation. Your cafeteria manager requests permission to bring in a portable rock-climbing wall for students to climb during the lunch period as part of a promotion that emphasizes nutrition and physical activity. The foodservice director wants to try a breakfast-in-the-classroom project. The band director would like the school band to play during lunch to celebrate Music in Our Schools Month. The disruptions and the possible complaints by the custodians might lead you to reject such ideas. But before you do, discuss your concerns with the school nutrition team and be open to their suggestions.

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Be a role model. Do you eat lunch in the cafeteria? Do students and teachers sense that you support the efforts of the school nutrition team? Have you ever helped out as a "celebrity server" during special promotions? What snacks do you request for faculty or other personnel meetings? Do you make healthy choices when eating around children?

The childhood obesity crisis is a daunting problem. But it has led to some truly exciting opportunities for principals, school nutrition professionals, and other advocates of child health to make changes in what children eat and drink in school that could literally save the next generation.

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WEB RESOURCES

The School Nutrition Association (formerly the American School Food Service Association) supports school nutrition programs by providing numerous tools and resources. Its Web site offers many timely and cutting-edge resources and programs, including examples of school wellness policies. www.schoolnutrition.org

The U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Education, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have produced Making It Happen, School Nutrition Success Stories, a compendium of best practice strategies. www.fns.usda.gov/tn
www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/Nutrition/Making-It-Happen

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is the primary source for information about the National School Lunch Program. www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch

A Model Program

In San Francisco, Aptos Middle School Principal Linal Ishibashi spearheaded wellness changes for cafeteria offerings, vending machines, and fund-raising sales that eventually became a model for the entire district. In collaboration with the cafeteria supervisor, a school-based nutrition committee conducted a student survey of school food, developed new standards, and researched alternative products and ingredients. As a result, french fries and nachos were removed from the cafeteria menu and high-fat/high-sugar foods on the à la carte line were replaced with healthier options, including soups, salads, and sushi.

In addition, all soft drinks were removed from vending machines in the physical education department and replaced with bottled water. The school found that students purchased more bottles of water than they did soft drinks—and since the larger water bottles sell at a higher price, revenue from these vending machines actually increased.

This and other examples are featured in Making It Happen, School Nutrition Success Stories, a compendium of best practice strategies produced last year by the U.S. departments of Agriculture and Education, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.