

3 — Principles for Improving Eating Behaviors

Smarter Lunchrooms focuses on six research-based principles about various environmental cues that influence people’s eating behavior. These principles apply to school lunchrooms, as well as restaurants, food courts and at home.

MANAGE PORTION SIZES

Limit portion sizes of less healthy foods such as cookies, chips and other snack foods. The larger the portion, the more people will eat. Research shows that people will “clean their plate” even after they are full.

Food service staff can manage portion sizes for food items that should be limited – such as noncreditable foods and competitive foods – by using smaller containers, plates and serving utensils. An example is using portion controlled (PC) packets for condiments instead of allowing students to self-serve from bulk dispensers.

Food service staff can portion healthy foods to ensure meal pattern compliance and speed up the serving line. School meals must comply with the required portion sizes in the USDA meal patterns. Pre-portion self-selected foods to help:

- provide the minimum serving size required by the meal patterns;
- increase convenience; and
- speed up the serving line.

A common example for school meals is pre-portioning fruits and vegetables into ½-cup servings to help students comply with the USDA’s requirement to select at least ½ cup of fruits or vegetables with each reimbursable meal. Another example is pre-portioning the meat/meat alternate component (e.g., cheese, tuna fish or hummus) for a self-serve salad bar.

Competitive foods include foods and beverages sold to students anytime on school premises other than meals served through the USDA school meal programs. Competitive foods include, but are not limited to, cafeteria a la carte, vending machines, school stores and fundraisers. For more information, see the CSDE’s [Competitive Foods](#) Web page.

Noncreditable foods include foods and beverages that cannot credit toward the NSLP and SBP meal patterns, such as condiments, pudding, bacon and cream cheese. These foods often contain little nutritional value and are high in fat, sugars and sodium. For more information, see the CSDE’s handout, [Noncreditable Foods](#).



INCREASE CONVENIENCE

Make healthy foods more convenient. The easier it is to select and eat a food, the more likely people are to eat it. Take advantage of every point of student interaction in the cafeteria and dining areas by making reimbursable meals available at all snack windows and convenience lines.

Make healthy foods easy for students to reach by putting them in the front, on middle shelves. Put less healthy choices such as cookies, chips and other snack foods at the very top or bottom shelves, and in the back.

Food service staff can use the techniques below to make healthy foods convenient.

- Wedge, section, slice or cut whole fruits. This significantly increases the chance of students taking and eating them.
- Make a “meals only” serving line, where pre-packed reimbursable meals are ready for students to grab and go.
- Make a healthy foods grab-and-go line with pre-cut and bagged healthy foods.
- Put healthy foods by the cash register.
- Offer pre-packed hot and cold healthy lunch alternatives on all serving lines.
- Make healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables self-serve, whenever possible.

Convenience in Action

East Hampton Middle School created a new quick and convenient serving line in the dining area by using a large wooden farmer’s cart. The cart offers prepackaged, reimbursable grab-and-go meals, and a la carte fresh fruits, vegetables and milk. This speeds up the regular serving line, and increases students’ selection of healthier salad and sandwich meals.



Grab-and-go reimbursable meals cart at East Hampton Middle School

Convenience in Action

Cutler Middle School's popular salad bar is quick and convenient. Leafy greens and meat/meat alternate choices are pre-portioned in clear plastic containers to ensure proper serving sizes and speed up the line. Cafeteria staff constantly restocks the salad bar during each lunch wave so it looks full and appealing for all students.



Salad bar at Cutler Middle School in Groton



A table full of students' salad bar lunches at Cutler Middle School in Groton

IMPROVE VISIBILITY

Use visibility to encourage healthy choices and discourage less healthy choices. Make healthy foods easy to spot. Students are more likely to choose the first foods they see, and are more likely to eat foods they choose themselves. Food service staff can use the techniques below to help highlight healthy foods and make them more visible.

- **Containers:** Use clear containers for healthy foods and opaque containers for less healthy foods.
- **Line positioning:** Foods displayed more visibly (at eye level or first in line) tend to be chosen more often than other items. Put healthy choices at **students' eye level**, within reach, and in areas of high traffic. Move healthy foods to the beginning of the line, and in front of other foods. **Go vertical!** When serving line space is limited, use tiered baskets and shelving to display healthy foods like fruits and vegetables.



Vegetable choices at Pleasant Valley Elementary School in South Windsor

- **Lighting:** Move foods to well-lit locations or add lighting when possible. Gooseneck lamps provide an inexpensive way to light foods, and are readily available during back-to-school sales in late summer.
- **Signage:** Use attractive well-placed signs to call attention to specific foods. Place signs near the food to attract students' attention. Hang signs over the food, or use table-tents or clear plastic standing frames to display signs on the serving line.

The HFFKA requires that schools must identify foods that are part of the reimbursable meal near or at the beginning of the serving line and prior to the point of service (POS). The POS is the point in the food service operation where staff can accurately determine that a reimbursable free, reduced-price or paid lunch has been served to an eligible child.

Out of sight, out of mind! Research shows that simply seeing foods such as brownies or cookies can lead to unplanned consumption. When unhealthy foods are out of sight, people are much less likely to eat them because they are not thinking about them.



Conversely, highly visible healthy food options can lead to increased consumption of healthier foods. For example, people are more likely to eat carrot sticks when they are pre-cut and stored in a clear container in the refrigerator. School nutrition programs can apply this strategy to the cafeteria by making healthy foods more visible.

See the Signs!

Good signage can motivate students to choose healthy foods. Make sure the cafeteria's signage is doing its job. Signs should be attractive, easy to read, and promote healthy choices and school meals.

Signage Checklist

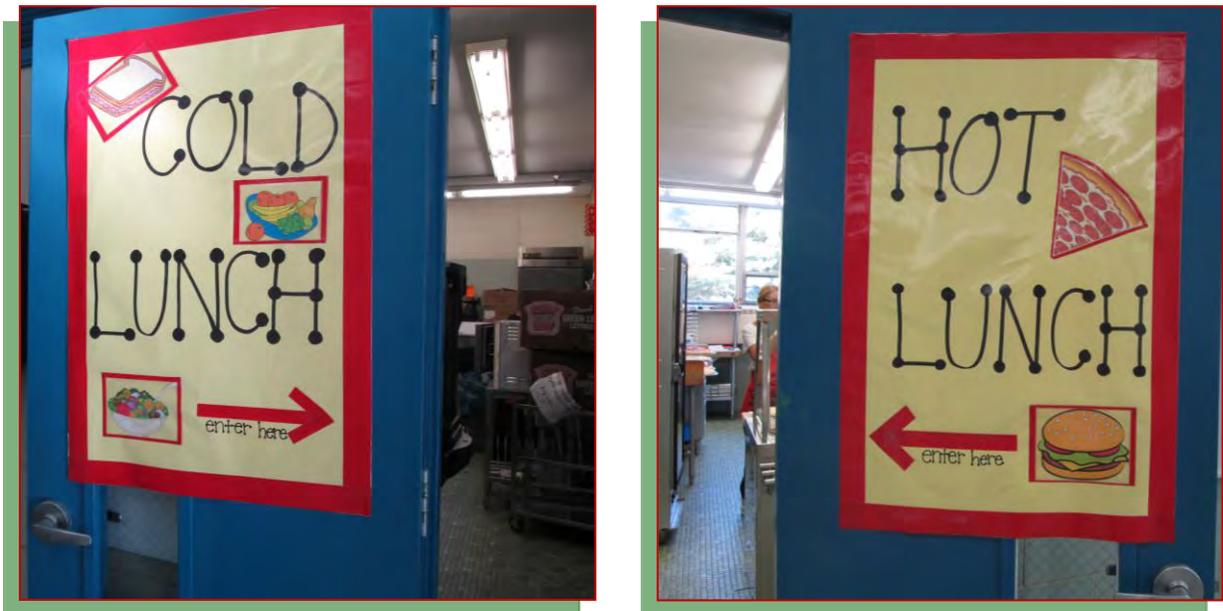
- The cafeteria has attractive, easy-to-read menu boards just outside or at the beginning of each serving line.
- Each serving line has signs that explain what students can take for a reimbursable meal.
- Each serving line has signs that contain positive messages to encourage students' selection of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods.
- Each cashier's station or POS has signs that use positive language to remind students to choose at least one fruit or vegetable with their meal, e.g., "*Fruit is free with your meal*" or "*Choose any two vegetables.*"
- All serving areas have colorful and attractive posters featuring nutrition education messages.
- All dining areas have colorful and attractive posters featuring nutrition education messages.
- Bulletin boards located in or near the cafeteria promote school meals and provide positive nutrition education messages.
- Staff rotates signs and posters throughout the school year to provide new information, increase student interest and reflect seasonal menu changes.
- Staff replaces signs and posters as soon as they show signs of wear and tear.

Signage Tips

- Print signs from the computer. Make the font simple and bold enough to read. Make sure handwritten signs are neat and attractive.
- Use colors and photographs or clip art to highlight items. Graphics should enhance the sign without making it look too busy.
- Laminate signs and posters for display on walls.
- Use removable adhesive strips or putty to attach signs to sneeze guards or walls. If using tape, put it on the back so it is not visible. Roll it or use double-sided tape.
- Display serving line signs in clear plastic standing frames, or use sign stands. Static-cling signs work well for serving line sneeze guards.
- If possible, use table tents on cafeteria tables to promote menu items and special events such as taste-tests.

For resources on cafeteria signage and posters, see the CSDE's [Menu Planning and Food Production](#) resource list.

Sample Signage



Attractive handwritten posters direct students to the hot and cold lunch lines at Cutler Middle School in Groton



The "1 Terrific Tray" dry-erase menu board poster announces daily lunch choices at Cutler Middle School in Groton



Nutrition posters add color and interest to a serving line wall at Orchard Hill Elementary School in South Windsor



Connecticut Grown posters promote local produce at CREC International Magnet School in South Windsor

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Signs promoting fruits and vegetables on the serving line at Illing Middle School in Manchester



Static-cling signs on the serving line at CREC International Magnet School in South Windsor



"Grab N' Go" sign over the grab-and-go line at New London High School



"Treasure Tray" sign at the cashier's station at CREC International Magnet School in South Windsor

ENHANCE TASTE EXPECTATIONS

Taste expectations are the perception of what a food will taste like based on its description and appearance. When students have positive taste expectations about the cafeteria, they are more likely to buy school meals.

Names, appearance and reputation create expectations. Help students expect healthy foods to taste good by using descriptive menu names, and serving attractive foods with consistent quality. Food service staff can use the strategies below to help increase students' taste expectations.

- **People “eat” with their eyes first.** Present foods in appealing and attractive displays to entice students to take them. Examples include tiered metal baskets or brightly colored bowls and containers instead of steam table pans, and brightly colored student trays instead of trays with drab colors.
- **Name foods** with age-appropriate names or descriptions. The B.E.N. Center’s research shows that children are more likely to take a vegetable when it has a fun and interesting name. For examples, see “Name that Veggie!” on the next page.
- Display **creative names** for menu items on menu boards, bulletin boards and signs, both outside and inside the cafeteria. Menus listed outside the cafeteria get students thinking about their choices before they enter the lunchroom.

Which lunch menu would you rather eat?

<p>Turkey sandwich Salad Apple Milk</p>	<p>Oven-roasted turkey breast on seven-grain harvest bread Crisp salad greens with choice of dressing Crunchy red apple Ice cold low-fat milk</p>
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- Before students even get to the serving line, **use displays, posters, bulletin boards and other colorful messages** to let them know the daily meal choices and provide nutrition education. Continue the use of attractive and visible signage throughout the serving lines. For more information, see “[See the Signs!](#)” on page 17.
- Use **suggestive selling** to focus students on what you want them to choose by inviting them to try specific foods, both verbally and with signage. For more information, see “Use Suggestive Selling” on page 25.

Name that Veggie!

School nutrition programs can create student interest by using **creative, descriptive age-appropriate names** on the lunch menu. Speak to your audience. Use fantasy names for young children, e.g., “super-strength spinach” or “x-ray carrots.” Use descriptive names for older children, e.g., “crunchy garden carrots” or “rosemary roasted potatoes.” Make sure the name is not too complicated. It needs to capture students’ attention, not dissuade purchases.

As appropriate to the school’s grade levels, consider engaging students in creating new menu names as part of classroom nutrition education or a student group activity. Students understand best what appeals to their peers.



A word of caution: Make sure the school menu lives up to the descriptions. If the food sounds good but the taste does not meet the description, students will quickly learn to distrust the menu.

Below are some examples of creative food names for elementary and secondary menus.

Elementary *

- X-ray vision carrots
- Power peas
- Glow-in-the-dark greens
- Dinosaur broccoli trees
- Banana ramas
- Tomato bursts
- Golden pirate’s corn
- Apple crunchers
- Celery swords
- Mighty melon
- Jumping beans
- Razzle dazzle berry
- Super-duper veggies
- Bandit beans
- Mixed-up fruit cup
- Monster mashed potatoes
- Snow White’s applesauce

Secondary

- Succulent summer corn
- Crisp celery and carrot sticks
- Ginger Oriental vegetable stir-fry
- Farm-fresh tomatoes
- Crispy roasted red potatoes
- Maple-glazed butternut squash
- Crunchy red apples
- Zesty zucchini
- Garlic green beans
- Oven-roasted garlic cauliflower
- Honey-glazed carrot coins
- Steamed broccoli bites with lemon
- Parmesan mashed potatoes
- Roasted vegetable medley

* Source: Project Refresh Toolkit. Maryland State Department of Education, 2011.
<http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/hsmrs/Maryland/ReFresh.pdf>

Farm to School

Schools can use locally grown produce to enhance students' taste expectations of school menus. The school nutrition program can promote the cafeteria's farm-to-school connection in a variety of ways, such as:

- promoting locally grown foods on school menus,
- highlighting locally grown fruits and vegetables on the serving line;
- conducting taste-tests to get students excited about new foods and recipes;
- sending recipes home with students; and
- advertising the cafeteria's farm-to-school connection to students, families and school staff through various communication channels, such as the district's Web site and school newsletters.

Connecticut's Farm-to-School Program involves a variety of school experiences and programs about gardening, educating children about nutrition, and purchasing fresh, locally grown farm products. Their Web site includes resources and marketing materials such as [Connecticut Grown Cards](#) to promote locally grown foods. For more information, visit the CSDE's [Farm to School](#) Web page and the Department of Agriculture's [Farm to School Promotional Materials and Programs](#) Web page.

The [Start with Half a Cup](#) collaboration has great tools for promoting local farm to school initiatives, including signage, stickers, [Connecticut Grown fruit and vegetable posters](#), promotions and taste-testing ideas.



Promoting locally grown fruit at Duffy Elementary School in West Hartford



Promoting school recipes using local produce at CREC International Magnet School in South Windsor

USE SUGGESTIVE SELLING

Suggestive selling includes signs and verbal prompts that **focus customers on what you want them to choose**, and influence them to see and desire specific products. The food service industry typically uses a different approach to suggestive selling than schools.

- *“Would you like fries with that?”*
Restaurants and fast food outlets often use suggestive selling to influence customers to buy unhealthy foods like french fries, soda and desserts.
- *“Would you like a crunchy red apple or fresh garden salad with your lunch?”* School food service staff can use the same technique to help students make **healthy** choices. Suggestive selling in schools should focus on encouraging healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables, with food service staff verbally inviting students to try them.



Train servers and cashiers on the importance of suggestive selling, and give them concrete examples of what to say. For examples, see “Tips for Suggestive Selling” on page 26. Position attractive and colorful signage to reinforce messages about healthy choices

Be positive! Staff attitudes (positive and negative) can influence students’ food choices. School food service staff can promote healthy school meals by having positive and pleasant interactions with students, throughout the serving line.

Tips for Suggestive Selling

Variety is key!

- Give students **different choices of healthy foods** such as vegetables and fruits. This makes it more likely that students will find an option they want to choose.
- Encourage students to decide **which** vegetable or fruit choice to take, rather than **whether** to take a vegetable or fruit. Even a simple choice like carrot sticks or celery sticks is better than no choice. When menus include choices such as different vegetables and fruits, students are empowered to make their own decisions and are more likely to choose a balanced meal. This helps students eat healthy, and encourages more students to choose reimbursable meals.
- Serving line staff and cashiers can use the strategies below to help encourage students' selection of healthy reimbursable meals.
 - Use positive language and let students know they have a choice, e.g., *"Would you like a crunchy red apple or some fresh sweet strawberries?"*
 - Describe the choices attractively, using positive language, e.g., *"Do you want crispy green salad or steamed broccoli bites today?"*
 - Avoid questions that students can answer "no." For example, instead of asking, *"Do you want fruit with your meal?"* ask, *"Which fruit would you like with your meal?"*
 - Avoid making statements about rules and regulations, e.g., *"The USDA requires you to take a fruit or vegetable with your meal"* or *"You must take a fruit or vegetable."*
 - Use language that emphasizes students can make a choice that rounds out the meal and provides a great deal, e.g., *"Which fruit or vegetable would you like to round out your tray for the best meal deal?"*
 - Use positive signage such as *"Fruits and vegetables are free with your meal!"* or *"Get your fresh fruit here today!"* For information on how to use signage for suggestive selling, see "[See the Signs!](#)" on page 17.



Tips for Suggestive Selling, continued

Encouraging selection of a vegetable on the serving line

- *“Would you like (insert hot vegetable of the day, e.g., garden green peas) today or would you like (insert cold vegetable/ salad of the day, e.g., raw baby carrots or fresh garden salad)?”*
- *“Would you like some fresh garden salad or crunchy carrot sticks with your pizza?”*



Ensuring fruit or vegetable selection on student's tray

Position fruit and vegetable trays with positive signage near the cashier, and use encouraging language.

- *“These fruits and vegetables come free with your meal. Which one (or two) would you like?”*
- *“Take your pick from any fruit or vegetable on this tray.”*
- *“Choose your favorite fruit or vegetable.”*
- *“Please choose at least one more fruit or vegetable to round out your tray. Which one would you like?”*



“Treasure Tray” of fruits, vegetables, juice and white milk available at the cash register at CREC International Magnet School in South Windsor

SET SMART PRICING STRATEGIES

“Bundling” is selling two or more food items together for a discounted price. Fast food restaurants frequently use this strategy to sell value meals or other less healthy foods, such as adding soda and fries to a fast food entree, or selling three 40-cent cookies for one dollar.

Schools can use this strategy to encourage **healthy** food choices and increase students’ selection of reimbursable meals. Examples include bundling a packaged chef’s salad with a whole-grain roll and fresh fruit, or bundling a grab-and-go sandwich with raw vegetables and canned fruit. These bundled options make it easy for students to grab quick, healthy meals.

When determining a la carte prices, avoid bundling less healthy competitive foods such as cookies, chips and similar snacks. The goal of school nutrition programs is to sell more **meals**, not more snacks. **Use a la carte pricing strategies to make school meals the best deal.**

Bundling in Action

East Hampton Middle school used bundling to convert a popular a la carte item into a successful reimbursable meal. The cafeteria staff packaged soft hot pretzels with a variety of meal component items such as bagged apple slices, baby carrots, cheese sticks, hummus and juice. These pre-packed meals are available on all serving lines to create fast grab-and-go reimbursable meal choices for students.



Grab-and-go turkey sandwich lunch at East Hampton Middle School



Grab-and-go salad lunch at Illing Middle School in Manchester