



## Nutritional Quality of School Meals<sup>1</sup>

In 1993, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began the “School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children” (SMI) to improve the nutritional content of school lunches and breakfasts. As a result of that and other efforts, the nutritional quality of school meals has been improving.

The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III (SNDA III) of SY 2004-2005 school meals determined that the majority of schools offer breakfasts and lunches that meet the standards for key nutrients like vitamins A and C, calcium, protein, and iron. However, the majority of school lunches are still too high in fat, saturated fat, and sodium. In addition, schools made more progress in implementing the SMI standards between SNDA I (SY1991-1992) and SNDA II (SY1998-1999) than between SNDA II and SNDA III.

- **Target Nutrients:** Over 85 percent of schools offer lunches that meet the USDA standards for each of the key target nutrients – protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron. When taking students’ selections into account, more than 70 percent of students choose lunches that meet the USDA standards for each nutrient. More than three-quarters of schools offer and serve school breakfasts that meet USDA standards for these nutrients.



- **Calories:** Although 71 percent of schools *offer* lunches that meet the required minimum for calories, only half of students choose meals that meet calorie standards. There were no major changes in the calories served between SY 1998-1999 and SY 2004-2005. At breakfast, less than one-third of schools meet the standard for calories. (Twenty-three percent of schools meet the standard for breakfasts offered and 31 percent for breakfasts served.)

### Top Sources of Saturated Fat in School Lunches

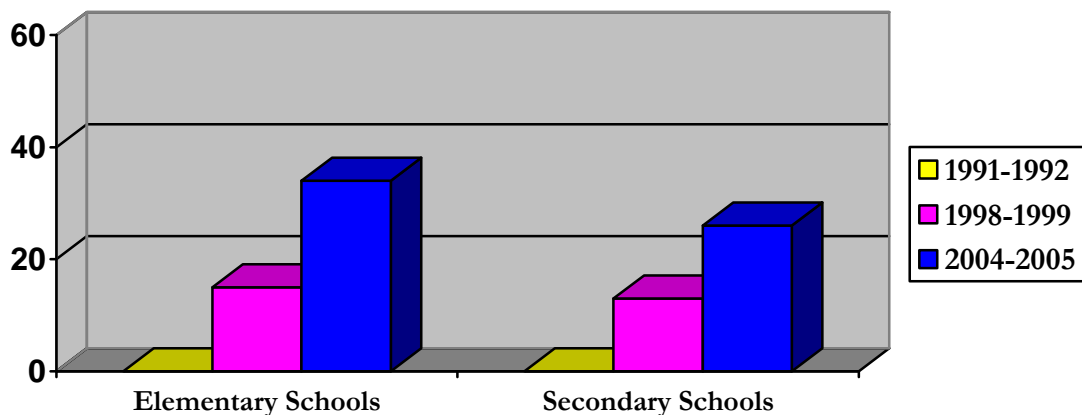


- **Pizza Products**
- **Condiments/Spreads**
- **2% Milk**
- **Salad Plates/Salad Bars**
- **Hamburgers and Cheeseburgers**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2007). *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study – III: Summary of Findings*. Accessed on November 2007 at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/SNDAIII-SummaryofFindings.pdf>

- **Fat:** Low-fat and low-saturated-fat options are widely available in school meals; 93 percent of elementary and 86 percent of secondary schools offer students a low-fat option. The percentage of students choosing lunches meeting the total fat standard (approximately one-quarter of elementary schools and 12 percent of secondary schools) did not change significantly from SY 1998-1999 to SY 2004-2005. Eighty-eight percent of schools offer and 81 percent serve breakfasts that meet the SMI standards for total fat.
- **Saturated Fat:** The percentage of schools serving lunches meeting the USDA standard for saturated fat (less than 10 percent of calories) doubled from SY 1998-1999 to SY 2004-2005. In elementary schools, the percentage rose from 15 to 34 percent and in secondary schools it increased from 13 to 26 percent. On a typical day, 90 percent of elementary schools and 96 percent of secondary schools offer students the opportunity to select a low-saturated-fat lunch. At breakfast, the proportions of schools meeting the standards for saturated fat are 75 percent for breakfasts offered and 69 percent for breakfasts served.

### Proportion of Schools Serving Lunches that Meet Saturated Fat Standard



- **Cholesterol:** Almost all schools offer and serve lunches consistent with the benchmark for cholesterol (no more than 100 mg per lunch) with 96 percent of lunches offered and 99 percent of lunches served meeting the standard. The vast majority of schools (94 percent) offer school breakfasts containing mean cholesterol levels well below 75 mg.
- **Sodium:** Virtually no schools offer or serve lunches that meet the benchmark for sodium (less than 800 mg per lunch). The average sodium level in school lunches is 1442 mg, 180% above the benchmark level. Fifty-eight percent of schools offered and 43 percent of schools serve breakfasts that meet the sodium benchmark of less than 600 mg per breakfast.
- **Fiber:** Almost all schools offer and serve lunches consistent with benchmarks for fiber. Based on the benchmark of one third of the daily target of (age + 5) grams, 92 percent of lunches offered and 82 percent of lunches served meet the standard. Schools average 7 grams of fiber for lunch, which meets the required fiber benchmark. However, only about 5

percent of lunch menus offer foods made from whole grains or dried beans, which are excellent sources of fiber.

### Fiber in School Breakfasts

	Proportion of schools that meet the benchmark*	Percentage of daily fiber benchmark in average school breakfast
Elementary Schools	29%	84%
Middle Schools	8%	68%
High Schools	5%	60%

\*The fiber benchmark for breakfasts is one-fourth of the daily target (age + 5) grams

- **Fruits and Vegetables:** More than half of schools (58 percent) offer students some type of fresh fruit and/or raw vegetables every day at lunchtime. Secondary schools offer an average of 13 fruit and vegetable options (including canned fruit and cooked vegetables) to students each week. The percentage of menus offering *only* the minimum of two fruit/vegetable options per day dropped from 37 percent in SY 1998-1999 to 27 percent in SY 2004-2005. Juice was the most common fruit/vegetable offering at breakfast and was available on 88 percent of breakfast menus.



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