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School Lunch Report Card

A Report by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine

August 2006

As children enter school this fall, they will learn the importance of math, science, and English. But high juvenile obesity rates and an epidemic of type 2 diabetes in children highlight the need for school lunchrooms to teach another crucial lesson: Low-fat vegetarian lunches rich in fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains can help young people maintain healthy body weights and reduce the risk of chronic disease later in life.

Because the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) plays an important role in developing children's eating habits, dietitians with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) conducted a review of the food served in school lunchrooms. This report, the fifth completed by PCRM, examines 18 major school districts across the country and also evaluates schools' efforts to encourage the consumption of healthy foods and educate students about nutrition. The results are summarized in a report card on page 9.

PCRM graded schools based on criteria in three major categories: Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention, Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy, and Nutrition Initiatives. This year, the grading system has been updated and simplified, but the goal remains the same: to determine whether foods served in schools are promoting the health of all children. The results demonstrate that school lunches are gradually improving, but many school districts are putting children's health at risk by serving unhealthful food.

Background

The NSLP was established in 1946 to safeguard the health and well-being of the nation's children by serving free and low-cost nutritionally balanced meals to students each day. Its secondary purpose was to encourage the consumption of domestic agricultural commodities. The Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the program at the federal level. Today, the program exists in more than 100,000 public and nonprofit private schools and serves lunches to more than 28 million children each school day. Schools participating in the NSLP receive cash subsidies, donated commodities, and free bonus commodities for each meal served. In return, schools are supposed to serve lunches that meet federal nutrition requirements.

In recent years, childhood obesity has become a serious and growing public health problem. In 2010, nearly half the children in North America will be overweight or obese, according to a recent report in the *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity*. Obesity is

associated with a wide range of health problems, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, some forms of cancer, gallbladder disease, asthma, and sleep apnea. All of these conditions are linked to poor dietary habits such as the over-consumption of calories, fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar.

These alarming statistics and negative health trends are beginning to prompt change in the school nutrition environment. Four states—California, Florida, Hawaii, and New York—have healthy school lunch resolutions in place that aim to combat the obesity epidemic. These resolutions recommend that vegetarian entrée options be served daily and urge schools to place an increased emphasis on healthy plant foods such as fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes.

The USDA has also taken some steps to increase children's access to healthful foods. The USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program now provides \$9 million a year to schools in eight states and three Indian Tribal Organizations to encourage increased consumption of fruits and vegetables as snacks. Participating schools say the program is very successful, and its funding should be increased. The USDA has also implemented the Team Nutrition program, which educates food service staff about preparing healthy foods. While these positive initiatives are limited in scope, they do offer a glimpse of what the USDA could accomplish if it shifted its focus to promoting the health of all children.

PCRM's Healthy School Lunch Campaign

PCRM's Healthy School Lunch Campaign was established to protect children's health and reduce childhood obesity rates by increasing the availability of healthy plant-based foods in schools. To that end, PCRM encourages lawmakers, the USDA, and school districts to achieve the Healthy School Lunch Campaign goal of ensuring that *all* foods served promote the health of all children.

Abundant scientific evidence supports the consumption of plant-based diets for health promotion. Individuals following healthy plant-based diets are less likely to be overweight or obese, and they have a reduced risk of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, high cholesterol, and some cancers. Moreover, studies show that vegetarian teens have higher intakes of essential vitamins and minerals.

Roadblocks to Health

School districts face numerous challenges when it comes to serving healthy foods and offering nutrition education. These problems include a lack of financial and programmatic support from the USDA and lawmakers, as well as a lack of social support for healthy eating habits from corporate interests and, at times, families and communities.

The Commodity Foods Contradiction

The USDA commodity system suffers from a serious conflict of interest. The USDA pledges to provide nutritious meals for school children, yet the department must also support food industries, including those that produce foods that contribute to obesity, heart disease, and cancer. The USDA buys hundreds of millions of pounds of excess beef, pork, milk, and other high-fat meat and dairy products to bolster dropping prices.

State processing programs allow school districts to contract with commercial food processors to convert raw USDA commodities into more convenient, reprocessed ready-to-use end products. Products high in saturated fat and cholesterol constitute most of the foods offered through this program. The top reprocessed items include cooked beef and pork patties and links, chicken nuggets, chicken patties and roasted pieces, turkey hot dogs, bologna, and pizza. Because of the way in which the school lunch program is structured, it can cost a school district more than twice as much to provide a high-fiber, low-fat veggie burger instead of a high-fat, zero-fiber hamburger.

Inflexible Menu Planning

The USDA's Traditional Food Based Menu Planning Approach is an inflexible system that makes it more difficult for schools to offer meat alternatives and some other healthful foods. As an alternative, the department does allow schools to use the Nutrient Standard Menu Planning Approach. Schools that use the nutrient-based menu planning system are allowed more creativity and flexibility in menu planning and are able to serve a variety of healthy foods. However, to employ this alternative, schools must use expensive computer software to conduct nutritional analyses.

Lack of Accountability

Although federal law requires schools to ensure that menus meet the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, this mandate is not well enforced. In fact, the federal government's most recent School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study found that an astonishing 80 percent of schools serve too much fatty food to comply with federal guidelines. Even schools that comply with USDA regulations still offer more fat than should be found in a healthy diet. A wide range of research has found that low-fat diets offer important health benefits, including weight control and cholesterol reduction.

Making the Grade

PCRM recognizes school districts that go above and beyond USDA requirements. The USDA gives schools modest nutrition goals that many nutrition experts believe are inadequate, in part because they downplay the fact that plant-based foods are crucial for health. Abundant evidence shows that schools should meet higher standards for optimum health. Therefore, PCRM grades districts based on more meaningful criteria. School districts are not yet required by the USDA to serve plant-based meals, offer nondairy beverages, or develop innovative nutrition programs. Districts that score well in these areas deserve special recognition.

The Top of the Class

To earn a perfect score, school districts must meet USDA nutrition requirements, and they must also serve a nondairy vegetarian (vegan) entrée daily, a variety of fresh or low-fat vegetable side dishes and fresh fruits daily, make a nondairy beverage available to all students, and provide nutrition education in the cafeteria, as well as offer programs that promote healthy eating. Innovative programs include farm-to-school programs, cafeteria school gardens, farmer's market salad bar programs, and other inventive ways to encourage the consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.

Encouraging Trends

Every year, PCRM documents improvements in the types of foods offered in schools. Despite the many barriers to serving healthy vegetarian and vegan entrées in elementary schools, several districts have made these items more available. This year, an impressive 13 of the 18 districts surveyed had a vegan option at least once within two weeks. Twelve of these districts had vegan selections on the menu regularly or available daily upon request.

Most Improved Player

This year, Fairfax County in Virginia wins most improved district, coming out on the top of the list with an A. Fairfax County increased its score from a B in 2004 by increasing the number of vegan entrées offered and featuring at least one vegan entrée daily instead of once a week. Lunches also include a choice of many different healthy fruit and vegetable sides, and students have the opportunity to purchase soymilk. Fairfax County has done an excellent job of improving the healthfulness of its lunches.

The Criteria

Review Process

PCRM evaluated 18 elementary school lunch programs from the largest school districts in the country. The report includes districts from the following regions of the United States: Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, New England, Southern, Southwest, and Western.

Criteria and Grading System

This year's review looked at three essential categories for children's nutrition in schools:

- **Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention**
- **Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy**
- **Nutrition Initiatives**

Each category includes subcategories, as described below, to measure different aspects of nutrition, health promotion, and disease prevention.

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention: 50 points

In this category, districts were graded on whether they met, at minimum, the USDA requirements of less than 30 percent of calories from fat and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. Districts were also judged on how frequently they served healthy low-fat, zero-cholesterol entrées. Such entrées are important for the prevention of

obesity and obesity-related diseases. Dietary fat is a concentrated source of calories, with nine calories per gram, compared with four calories per gram for protein and carbohydrates. The easiest way to reduce calorie intake and remain at a healthy weight is to reduce fat intake.

Research has linked consumption of dietary fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol to high blood pressure, elevated blood lipids, and increased heart disease risk. In addition, being overweight and consuming excess dietary fat increases the risk for developing type 2 diabetes and hormone-related cancers such as breast and prostate cancer.

With nutrition research emphasizing the health risks of cholesterol and fats and the disease-preventive power of many nutrients found exclusively in plant-based foods, it is especially important that schools provide plant-based meals that are low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. Most vegan entrées are naturally low in fat and cholesterol-free, and—when offered to children on a regular basis—will help them acquire healthy eating habits that will keep them slim and prevent a host of chronic diseases.

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention: 50 points

Subcategory	Data Source	Total Points	Formula
Did the district meet USDA National School Lunch Program nutrition requirements?	Menu Nutrition Analysis conducted by schools or PCRM	25 points	Average daily meal must be: Fat <30% of calories Saturated fat <10% of calories
How many vegan/vegetarian entrée options does the district offer?	Recent lunch menu (10-day period)	25 points	Featured vegan entrée daily=2 points per day for featured vegan entrées <i>or</i> Variety of vegan choices available on request=15 points <i>or</i> Vegetarian entrée daily=1 point per day for vegetarian entrée Bonus: Offering a variety of vegan options on a rotating basis (3 or more rotating options weekly)=5 points

Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy: 35 points

Separate from nutrition’s relationship to disease prevention is the issue of whether meal patterns meet nutrient needs and provide dietary options that promote the health of all children. The Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy category specifically measures whether the foods offered in elementary school lunches provide essential nutrients and fiber. To do this, the report grades school districts on the availability of daily low-fat vegetable side dishes, fresh vegetables, and fresh fruit. This category also includes points

for whether or not a school district had a nondairy beverage available. These components are fundamental to a balanced and nutrient-sufficient meal pattern.

Fruits and Vegetables. To promote health and be nutritionally adequate, meals should include low-fat vegetable side dishes and fruit. Adults who consume healthy amounts of fruits and vegetables often learned to eat them in childhood. Fruits and vegetables are packed with vitamin C, beta-carotene, riboflavin, iron, calcium, fiber, and many other nutrients. When schools offer tasty, low-fat vegetable side dishes—such as green salads, mixed vegetables, steamed broccoli, corn on the cob, and raw baby carrots—and fresh or dried fruit, children begin to develop a taste for these items. In this review, districts received the following:

- two points for each day over a five-day period they served a fresh vegetable or steamed or low-fat vegetable side dish
- one point for each day over a five-day period they served canned fruit or fruit juice, or two points for each day over a five-day period they served fresh or dried fruit
- one additional point for each day they served a choice of three or more healthy fruit and vegetable options

Nondairy Beverages. Nondairy beverage alternatives are essential in the NSLP. Many U.S. children are lactose intolerant or allergic to milk; others choose to avoid milk for other reasons, such as taste preferences, religious or ethical considerations, or health needs. The NSLP does not currently offer an alternative beverage to cow's milk to all children as an option on the lunch line. However, with the 2004 reauthorization of the National School Lunch Act, children who require or request an alternative to cow's milk are able to receive an alternative as long as they have a note from a parent.

At this point, calcium-fortified soymilk and calcium-fortified juices are more costly than dairy milk because cow's milk is purchased by the USDA through the commodities program and distributed at very low cost to schools. Despite the extra expense, some school districts are already offering nondairy beverage alternatives in school lunch programs, though this is often done à la carte. In this review, PCRM awarded 10 points to school districts that provide fortified nondairy milks, calcium-fortified fruit juices, or water to all students on a daily basis.

Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy: 35 points

Subcategory	Data Source	Total Points	Formula
Vegetable side dish	Recent lunch menu	10 points	Over 5-day period (points per day): 0 points: fried or high-fat vegetable <i>or</i> 2 points: fresh vegetable, steamed or low-fat vegetable dish (3g of fat or less per serving)
Fruit	Recent lunch menu	10 points	Over 5-day period (points per day): 0 points: canned pre-sweetened fruit 1 point: canned or fruit juice <i>or</i> 2 points: fresh or dried fruit
Wide variety of fresh fruits or fresh, steamed, or cooked low-fat vegetables served daily	Recent lunch menu	5 points	Over 5-day period (points per day) 1 point: 3 or more different options available each day
Nondairy beverage	Food service director	10 points	10 points: Nondairy beverage available daily to all students (à la carte or free) <i>or</i> 5 points: Available with note only

Nutrition Initiatives: 15 points

To promote health and ward off obesity, schools must teach children about good nutrition. This review evaluated districts on what steps they are taking to help children appreciate and choose healthy food and understand why diets built from fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes help prevent obesity and chronic diseases.

Schools received three points for having school gardens, salad bars, farm-to-school programs, or other innovative programs that encourage healthy eating. School districts that offered nutrition education through the food service department and in the cafeteria were also awarded additional points. Education is critical to establishing healthy nutrition habits. Therefore, districts received three points for offering nutrition messages written on the school menus, nutrition classes taught by dietitians or in the food service department, and other creative means of education. Schools received an additional three points for specifically promoting plant-based foods by highlighting them on their menus or marketing them to children. Finally, three points were given to school districts that offered incentives to students who choose healthy meals.

School vending machines that sell unhealthy snack foods and beverages compete with healthier foods in a child's daily energy intake. To encourage healthful choices, school vending machines should sell only low-fat snack items, 100 percent fruit juice, water, and nutrient-rich snack items. PCRMs' report awards one point to districts with vending machines if juice and water, rather than soda, were available; districts were given another point if snack foods were limited to low-fat items; and they received one point if fruit and

vegetable snacks were sold. School districts also received full credit—three points—if there were no vending machines in the cafeteria at all.

Nutrition Initiatives: 15 points

Subcategory	Data Source	Total Points	Formula
Innovative programs	Food service director	3 points	School garden Salad bar Farm-to-school Other
Nutrition education in cafeteria or through food service department.	Food service director	3 points	
Education about benefits of plant-based diets on menu	Menu	3 points	Written reference to vegetarian/vegan
Incentives for choosing healthy meals	Menu/Food service director	3 points	Healthy meals cost less <i>or</i> Students get rewarded for choosing a healthy, balanced meal
Vending machines	Food service director	3 points	1 point for only low-fat vending options 1 point for fresh fruit or vegetable options 1 point for only healthy beverage options <i>or</i> Full credit (3 points) given to schools with no vending machines in cafeteria

The Report Card

School District	Score	Grade
Fairfax County Public Schools (Virginia)	94	A
Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (North Carolina)	92	A-
Pinellas County Schools (Florida)	92	A-
San Diego Unified School District (California)	92	A-
Broward County Public Schools (Florida)	89	B+
New York City School District (New York)	88	B+
Miami-Dade Public Schools (Florida)	88	B+
Seattle Public Schools (Washington)	86	B
Dallas Independent School District (Texas)	85	B
Montgomery County Public Schools (Maryland)	84	B
Palm Beach County School District (Florida)	84	B
Hillsborough County School District (Florida)	82	B-
School District of La Crosse (Wisconsin)	79	C+
San Francisco Unified School District (California)	76	C
Oakland Unified School District (California)	75	C
Minneapolis Public Schools (Minnesota)	67	D+
Hancock County Schools (Mississippi)	63	D
Memphis City School District (Tennessee)	54	F

Individual districts

Fairfax County Public Schools: A

State: Virginia

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	50
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	33
Nutrition Initiatives	11
TOTAL	94

Fairfax County has 238 schools with 140,000 students and is the 13th largest district in the nation. In previous reports, Fairfax County was among the top contenders, and this year, the district scored the highest grade.

Fairfax County aims to provide nutritious foods that will prepare students to learn and succeed. Students can choose from a rotating variety of vegan options, including veggie patties, spaghetti with marinara sauce, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Every day,

students can choose between two entrée salads. Soymilk, 100 percent juice, and water are offered as dairy alternatives to all students at à la carte prices.

The food service department encourages healthy eating by teaching nutrition and cooking classes. Nutrition programs include the “Give Me 5! Colors That Jive!” campaign to help promote fruits and vegetables to students. An online nutrient calculator allows parents and students to evaluate the nutrition of snack foods. Nutrition education is an integral part of the curriculum from preschool through 12th grade, and the school cafeteria serves as a laboratory for applying knowledge and skills taught in the classroom by food service personnel.

**Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District: A-
State: North Carolina**

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	50
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	30
Nutrition Initiatives	12
TOTAL	92

More than 126,000 students attend 155 schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg district. The district shines by offering a vegan entrée of a variety of rice and bean dishes daily in all school cafeterias as part of the salad bar. Charlotte-Mecklenburg could improve its score by highlighting this option on the menu and providing some incentive to students to choose this healthy salad bar more often. The district also offers another unique vegan choice: sunflower butter and jelly sandwiches. Other highlights include a daily offering of a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, including such items as turnip greens and spinach, as well as a daily salad bar. The cafeterias in the district’s elementary schools do not have vending machines, though they can be found elsewhere in the schools.

The menu clearly defines the different types of vegetarian options and encourages students to try meatless meals at least once a week. Positive nutrition messages are written on cafeteria bulletin boards daily to encourage healthy eating.

**Pinellas County Schools: A-
State: Florida**

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	45
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	35
Nutrition Initiatives	12
TOTAL	92

The Pinellas County public school district is the 22nd largest district in the nation, with 135 schools and more than 148,000 students. Lunchrooms in the district offer a number of healthful options, including 15 different entrée salads. Each school decides individually which salads to serve depending on their students’ preferences. The farmer’s

market salad is particularly healthy: It is loaded with veggies and has no meat, cheese, or eggs, which means it has no cholesterol and much less saturated fat than other items. Additional healthy options available for lunch on a varying basis, depending on the school, include vegetarian wraps, pasta with marinara sauce, veggie burgers, and vegetarian chili. Students can purchase water à la carte, and juice is served as a side item.

The district encourages students to make wise food choices by marking healthy menu items that contribute less than 30 percent of total calories from fat with a “Hardy Heart” symbol. Dietitians provide nutrition education as requested by classrooms and physical education instructors.

To improve its score, Pinellas County could find low-fat replacements for some of its unhealthy school lunch offerings, which include such high-fat foods as cheeseburgers, a chicken patty on a bun, and sausage on a bun.

**San Diego City Unified School District: A-
State: California**

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	50
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	30
Nutrition Initiatives	12
TOTAL	92

San Diego is the 16th largest school district in the United States, with 140,000 students in more than 200 schools. All San Diego school meals meet California Shape Standards for nutrition, which are stricter than USDA requirements. The district encourages schools to reduce fat, sugar, and sodium in foods, as well as to boost fiber. San Diego schools serve vegetarian entrées daily, including a bean burrito and a teriyaki veggie burger. There is also a daily salad bar with a variety of fresh fruits; a variety of vegetables, including the Harvest of the Month vegetable; and side items such as beans, walnuts, and salsa. To promote greater health, there are no vending machines within the schools.

San Diego promotes good nutrition through a series of demonstrations given across the district, and the district has an ongoing series of themed events that promote several on-site school gardens. In addition, the district participates in the Harvest of the Month program, which features a different locally grown produce item each month.

**Broward County Public Schools: B+
State: Florida**

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	45
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	35
Nutrition Initiatives	9
TOTAL	89

Broward County is the fifth largest school district in the nation and serves more than 274,000 students in 264 schools. The district does an excellent job of serving fresh and tasty fruits and vegetables. Students in Broward County can choose fresh fruit or juice instead of dessert. To improve the overall healthfulness of meals, the food service department also eliminated all baked desserts at lunch. Vegetable sides are offered daily as part of a salad bar, and this fall salads will be offered in pre-packaged to-go cups. The district will also offer a choice of three salads, including a very healthy, all-vegetarian salad with beans, seeds, and vegetables. Homemade whole-wheat bread is served with the salads, and all pre-made buns and breads are also whole wheat. Students can also choose more fresh fruits, as well as vegetables and side dishes such as black beans or baked beans, mixing and matching as they like to make a meal. This is part of the district’s “Choose It Your Way Campaign,” which aims to meet the needs of all students. To further improve the program, Broward County could cut down on high-fat, meat- and dairy-centered main entrées, such as the hot dog on a bun, macaroni and cheese, and bologna and cheese sandwich, and replace them with more nutritious options.

The school food service department promotes nutrition through various activities, including parental input and participation, health fairs, and creative nutrition contests for the students. Broward County plans to expand its “Good to Go” program, which encourages healthy eating by offering a toy to students who choose a healthy meal that includes both fruits and vegetables. The district also promotes health by not allowing vending machines in elementary schools.

New York City School District: B+
State: New York

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	50
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	30
Nutrition Initiatives	8
TOTAL	88

The New York City School District is the largest in the nation, and over the past few years, the district has taken some important steps toward improving the healthfulness of its school lunch offerings. New York City caters to many different religious and ethnic populations. For example, schools with a high Muslim population serve more vegetarian options to accommodate religious restrictions on certain meats. Vegan entrées range from vegetarian nuggets with dipping sauce and garden burgers on a whole-wheat bun to green salads. Healthy side dishes include Cajun red beans and rice, vegetable fried rice, and turmeric-scented herb rice. The district uses only whole-grain breads and has banned the sale of whole milk and flavored low-fat milks.

Additionally, the district began the SchoolFood Plus Initiative, a multi-agency collaborative effort to help enhance student health and achievement by improving schools’ food and environment. The program includes nutrition education and focuses on bringing local, seasonal produce into schools. The program exists in 63 schools and is expanding to 100 schools this fall. Many of the program’s healthy plant-based recipes are

used and served in the district's schools. Healthy foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, are heavily marketed to students, and taste-tests help promote new items.

New York City could improve its score by making nondairy beverages available to all students at lunch and by promoting its range of vegetarian options.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools: B+
State: Florida

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	44
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	35
Nutrition Initiatives	9
TOTAL	88

Miami-Dade County, which includes 356 schools and more than 365,784 students, is the fourth largest district in the nation. The menu sports a variety of regular vegan options, including such items as a triple-decker peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a Creole beans and rice bowl, baked potatoes with low-fat toppings, and a vegan black bean and rice bowl. Miami could improve its offerings by making these options available every day. The district also offers a number of healthy vegetable sides daily, usually consisting of a salad and one hot vegetable. Although fresh fruits are available a few days a week, more options would be a positive next step. The cafeterias serve calcium-fortified orange juice as an alternative to dairy milk for all students who would rather drink juice.

The health/science curriculum includes nutrition education, and teachers can request additional nutrition education materials from the food service department. The nutrition education program uses school gardens and cooking demonstrations.

Seattle Public Schools: B
State: Washington

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	40
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	35
Nutrition Initiatives	11
TOTAL	86

Seattle Public Schools includes 104 schools and more than 44,000 students. Seattle highlights the importance of eating five to nine fruits and vegetables a day by serving a tossed green salad daily with a variety of seasonal and local fruits and vegetables. Specialty choices include snow peas, fresh spinach, jicama, and fresh Washington state apples. Students can choose from a rotating list of vegetarian entrée items that are sometimes vegan, such as the veggie burger or burritos with beans and salsa. The district could improve its score by offering more low-fat vegetarian items and fewer high-fat, high-cholesterol entrées such as the Grand Slam French Break Pizza with Chicken and the deli ham and cheese sandwich.

Seattle educates students by printing nutrition information and health-related activities on its menus. The district has also created the “Flavors of Diversity” program, which features menu items from different cultures and teaches children about the food traditions of other areas. Vending machines do not sell soda, and all snacks must meet strict nutrition standards.

Dallas Independent School District: B

State: Texas

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	40
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	33
Nutrition Initiatives	12
TOTAL	85

Dallas Independent School District is the nation’s 12th largest district, with 217 schools and 161,000 students. To encourage good nutrition and give students an easy way to make healthier food choices, Dallas offers the “Power Pack” meal daily. This meal derives less than 30 percent of calories from fat and less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, and it exceeds the recommended dietary allowances for vitamins A and C, iron, and calcium. The food service department rewards students who choose the Power Pack meal by including stickers, pencils, and other small prizes.

The district also offers even healthier high-fiber, zero-cholesterol entrée items, including rice and bean bowls, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and baked potatoes. Dallas could encourage more students to eat these items by featuring them more regularly on the menu. Students are able to choose 100 percent fruit juice as a component of their meal for no additional cost. The district does not allow the use of vending machines during the school day in elementary schools.

Montgomery County Public Schools: B

State: Maryland

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	45
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	27
Nutrition Initiatives	12
TOTAL	84

Montgomery County, which has 195 schools and 139,387 students, is the 17th largest district in the nation. Each day, Montgomery County serves a variety of vegetarian entrées, though these items are not printed on the menu. Vegan items are also available every day upon request. Vegetarian/vegan entrées include a vegan chicken-style patty, meatless chili, penne pasta with marinara sauce, pancakes with spiced pears, and quesadillas. All cafeterias serve 100 percent juice to all students.

Every school is part of Team Nutrition and therefore offers nutrition education materials in the cafeteria along with support materials for the classroom. Posters emphasize the importance of eating a balanced diet that includes fruits and vegetables. However, the district serves very few fresh or low-fat vegetable side dishes or fresh fruits.

The Montgomery County Public Schools Division of Food & Nutrition Services collaborated with the Department of Curriculum and Instruction to create other posters that emphasize the importance of physical activity and eating healthfully. A monthly newsletter also includes nutrition education. All cafeteria managers also receive updates on nutrition information at training meetings.

Palm Beach County School District: B
State: Florida

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	40
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	35
Nutrition Initiatives	9
TOTAL	84

Palm Beach County has 170,000 students in 163 public schools. Daily fruit and vegetable menu choices include a choice of fresh fruits, cupped fruits, salad cups and garden salads, or cooked vegetables to accompany the main entrées. Students have access to 100 percent fruit juice daily, and they can also choose a fresh fruit. Palm Beach offers a rotating list of vegetarian options, including vegetarian wraps, vegetarian chili, vegetarian Mexican pizza, and lasagna, but the district offers very few low-fat vegan entrées.

The food service department gives nutrition education talks to both students and teachers. The kitchen is also available upon request for tours and nutrition or cooking classes. Palm Beach County also offers students the Health-e Living Web site, an extensive online nutrition education program. One feature allows students to select options for lunch and receive a nutrition analysis of their selections. The food service department also regulates vending machines within the cafeteria. All products sold in these machines must meet criteria outlined by the staff dietitians.

Hillsborough County School District: B-
State: Florida

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	40
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	32
Nutrition Initiatives	10
TOTAL	82

With 235 schools and 194,000 students, Hillsborough County School District is the 10th largest in the nation.

In December 2004, state auditors performed a nutritional analysis of Hillsborough's school lunch program and found that saturated fat levels exceeded the federal limit by half a percentage point. The district immediately corrected the problem by altering menus to reduce fat content. Because of that quick corrective action, the district earned 25 points in this report for meeting USDA standards.

The district's menu still features too many high-fat foods, including hot dogs, jumbo pork tacos, and mozzarella cheese sticks. On a positive note, the district offers a vegetarian choice most days, as well as peanut butter, pecans, walnuts, sunflower seeds, and beans upon request. The district can improve the healthfulness of its meals overall by incorporating more of these healthier protein sources into the regular menu.

To encourage healthy eating, cafeterias feature a "smart choice" food or vegetable of the month each Wednesday and give kids fun facts about each item. Hillsborough does not place restrictions on what may be sold in vending machines, though fresh fruit and vegetable options are available.

School District of La Crosse, Wisconsin: C+
State: Wisconsin

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	40
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	30
Nutrition Initiatives	9
TOTAL	79

The School District of La Crosse has 15 schools and 7,500 students. La Crosse is fortunate to participate in the Department of Defense fresh fruit and vegetable program. This allows the district to offer salad bars and serve three to five different fresh fruits daily. Although vegetarian items are served some days, the district could improve its score by serving low-fat vegetarian favorites as regular items on the menu and by removing a number of unhealthy items such as chicken nuggets, cheese dippers, and meatballs and gravy.

The food service department held an "extreme salad bar makeover contest" to encourage healthy eating and promote fruit and vegetable consumption. Schools in the district were charged with creating an interesting theme and improving salad bar offerings. This contest was highly successful, and the salad bars remain in many of the schools to help students continue to eat more fruits and vegetables. Promotion of these items in all schools would improve the district's score and improve students' health. Because of the recent implementation of a local wellness policy, the district does not permit the use of vending machines in cafeterias during the school day.

San Francisco Unified School District: C
State: California

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	35
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	29
Nutrition Initiatives	12
TOTAL	76

The San Francisco Unified School District includes more than 160 schools and 60,000 students. Each day, San Francisco schools provide a vegetarian (but not vegan) entrée selection on their menus. These entrées include cheese pizza, grilled cheese on wheat, bean and cheese burritos, taco pockets, and macaroni and cheese with green beans. To improve its grade, the district could reduce the amount of fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol served to students by removing the cheese from its vegetarian items. San Francisco schools do offer a variety of fresh fruit throughout the week.

The district’s Health Services Department teaches healthy cooking classes to students. The food service department also hosts a variety of food- and nutrition-related activities throughout the school year. These include annual taste-tests when students come back to school and occasional taste-testing events during semesters. One school in the district currently has a model salad bar project.

Oakland Unified School District: C
State: California

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	38
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	28
Nutrition Initiatives	9
TOTAL	75

Oakland Unified School District is composed of 134 schools and 49,214 students. Each day, students can find a vegetarian option and are served juice upon request. However, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are the only available cholesterol-free entrées. The menu features many high-fat items, including double-stuff cheese pizza, chili-cheese dogs, and chili-cheese nachos. Fruit and vegetable offerings are also limited, with just one fruit and vegetable choice daily.

Many of Oakland’s schools, including the majority of elementary schools, provide nutrition education. Each school year, the district chooses three nutrition themes and prepares related activities and materials. For example, one theme this past year was “smart snacking,” which included a broccoli taste-test, materials for teachers (including posters, handouts, and bookmarks), and information for parents. The *Harvest of the Month* newsletter, which includes different sections with classroom activities, goes to some teachers at 24 schools. Four of those schools receive produce boxes to go with the newsletter, and the district is currently trying to expand this program to all 24 schools.

One school piloted a food preparation/cooking demo in which kids made food items. Next year, this program will expand to serve three schools.

Minneapolis Public Schools: D+

State: Minnesota

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	35
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	29
Nutrition Initiatives	3
TOTAL	67

Minneapolis Public Schools has 103 schools and 37,865 students. Although vegetarian options are available daily, they appear on the menu only twice a week; on other days, students must specifically request them. Vegetarian entrées include veggie burgers, bean and cheese burritos, macaroni and cheese, and grilled cheese sandwiches. Vegan options are limited, and the district’s score could be improved by increasing vegan options and by eliminating the high-fat dairy products to make vegetarian items healthier. Cafeterias serve a minimum of three fruit and vegetable sides daily. Fresh fruit and vegetables are offered nearly every day and include garden salads, mini carrots, bananas, apples, and orange smiles.

At this time, the district does not offer any major nutrition initiatives or nutrition education, but there are plans to implement nutrition education next year with the new school wellness policy.

Hancock County Schools: D

State: Mississippi

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	27
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	30
Nutrition Initiatives	6
TOTAL	63

Hancock County is a smaller district, with six schools and 4,100 students. The district has made serving fresh fruits and vegetables a priority, offering at least one fresh fruit and fresh vegetable or low-fat side dish daily. However, Hancock could improve its score by replacing some high-fat, high-calorie main entrées—such as the BBQ pulled-pork burger and the chicken patty sandwich—with healthier choices.

Hurricane Katrina made the 2005-2006 school year a difficult one for Hancock County schools. Despite that challenge, the district is taking some positive steps toward better health. In the fall, kindergarten teachers will include a fruit and vegetable 5-a-day program in their lesson plans. Under the guidance of a new wellness policy, schools are taking out carbonated drinks and high-fat snacks and replacing them with healthier low-fat choices, including granola bars, trail mix, baked chips, and fruit. Officials may make other changes as they begin to further implement the district’s new wellness policy.

Memphis City School District: F

State: Tennessee

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	28
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	18
Nutrition Initiatives	8
TOTAL	54

The Memphis City School District, which includes 191 schools and more than 119,000 students, is the 21st largest in the nation. Memphis schools have very limited vegetarian choices—pizza or cheese ravioli about once a week. Further, Lactaid milk (an enzymatically treated milk product) is the only available alternative to regular dairy milk, and this is only offered to students with a doctor’s note.

Cafeterias do offer four fruits and vegetables every day, although sometimes the fruit is canned or in frozen form (for example, cherry freeze and orange freeze). To improve its grade, the district could offer nondairy beverages, especially to children who are allergic to milk or choose not to drink it, and plant-based entrées that do not include high-fat meat and dairy products.

As part of an interesting nutrition education effort, a registered dietitian develops and implements nutrition education programs in the schools. These programs include grocery shopping tours, healthy cooking classes, and taste-testing parties.