

Healthy School Food Opportunities Q & A on LAUSD

Written by the Center for Food and Justice*
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Summary

Every school day, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) serves over half a million meals. The quality of these meals – nutrition, freshness, taste, and cultural appropriateness – helps determine whether students can live up to their learning potential. Over the next six months, parents, students, teachers, administrators, and community members have a rare opportunity to improve the food served to L.A. public school kids. The LAUSD School Board has directed the District to study school food and develop a plan to improve school food nutrition. Join us in urging LAUSD to make public schools healthier places to learn.

Q & A on School Food in L.A.

Who is served by LAUSD food service?

LAUSD is the second largest school system in the country, with 721,000 students, mostly low-income students of color. Seventy-two percent of LAUSD students qualify for free lunch and 5 percent qualify for reduced price lunch. For many students, school meals and snacks are a crucial part of their daily diet.

How many meals does LAUSD serve daily?

LAUSD serves 670,000 meals a day to students from pre-kindegarten through 12th grade, participants in after school programs, adult school students, and staff. Few schools serve fresh meals prepared on-site. Most use food prepared at the central kitchen or purchased from food vendors. This provides great potential to improve access to healthy, tasty food for low-income children.

What are current LAUSD food guidelines and are they working?

LAUSD currently follows Federal guidelines on the nutritional content of school meals. These guidelines set maximum limits for the fat content and minimum limits for the nutrient content of meals. LAUSD also sets some limits on the amount of junk food that can be sold in elementary schools outside of the school meal program. These rules are a good start, but more needs to be done to ensure that LAUSD food is healthy and appealing to students. Forty percent of low-income students in LAUSD are overweight or obese. Overweight and obesity can lead to serious health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

Is there an opportunity to update and improve these guidelines?

Yes. In May 2001, the LAUSD School board passed a Healthy School Foods Resolution, which called for a “review and analysis of foods served in our schools to arrive at a policy that would lead to better health through nutrition for District students.” The review will be conducted by an outside consultant and LAUSD staff, with advice from a committee comprised of parents, students, community members, principals, and cafeteria managers. The more public input, the more likely it is that the review will address a full range of issues relating to school food and lead to meaningful changes.

What is the Healthy School Foods Committee?

The Healthy School Food Committee (HSFC) is a group of committed parents, teachers, administrators, students, and community members who organized in reaction to the earliest draft of the Healthy School Foods Resolution. The HSFC, formed with the assistance of the Center for Food and Justice* of Occidental College, is working to build leadership within Los Angeles communities, with a goal of urging the LAUSD to create strong, District-wide policies to:

- serve fresh, good-tasting, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods in the cafeteria;
- make sure students of all income levels receive the same high-quality food;
- remove the stigma of eating in the cafeteria;
- provide training for cafeteria workers on nutrition and healthy cooking methods;
- serve more food grown in school gardens and on local farms;
- integrate eating and learning through nutrition education programs.

What is the Center for Food and Justice?

The Center for Food and Justice (CFJ) of Occidental College works to get better food into LA neighborhoods. It also supports getting fresh fruits and vegetables direct from local family farms. Thanks to a project launched by the CFJ and expanded by that district’s food service director, every public school in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District now has a Farmers’ Market Salad Bar serving fresh fruits and vegetables. We hope that these kinds of healthy, innovative programs can spread to the LAUSD and improve the meals served during the school day and the snacks provided to students in after-school programs.

How can you get involved in improving school food in the LAUSD?

For information on joining the Healthy School Food Committee or for opportunities to influence the LAUSD school food review, contact Alicia de Soto-Foley at 323-341-5094.

** The Center for Food and Justice was formerly known as the Community Food Security Project*