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School Lunch Report Card

A Report by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine

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As elementary school students return to the classroom this fall, many face more than academic challenges. These children stand on the threshold of obesity, diabetes, and other health problems tied to unhealthful diets. Because the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) plays an influential role in developing children's eating habits, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) has completed its fourth annual review of the food served in school lunchrooms. This report, which examines 11 of the nation's largest school districts, also evaluates nutrition education programs. Results are summarized in a report card on page 11.

This year, PCRM used a new and more comprehensive system for rating the districts' school lunch offerings. The goal was the same as in previous years: to rate the NSLP on *whether foods served in schools are promoting the health of all children*. The new report evaluates elementary school lunches and nutrition programs based on three general categories: *Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention, Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy, and Nutrition Initiatives*.

The key difference between the new system and the previous one is that ratings have been expanded to include information from nutritional analysis of the menus (levels of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, fiber, and vitamin C). Also, because many children get a significant number of daily calories from snack foods and foods sold in vending machines, the review evaluated the snack foods available to primary school children in vending machines on school campuses.

The new rating system makes direct comparisons between this report and those from previous years impossible, but it offers more complete information on how well a school lunch program is meeting the nutritional and health promotion needs of the children it serves.

Background

The NSLP was established in 1946 to provide nutritious food to children while also promoting the nation's agricultural interests. The program now operates in nearly 100,000 schools and residential childcare institutions and serves approximately 28 million lunches a day. Schools participating in the NSLP receive cash subsidies, donated commodities, and free bonus shipments for each meal served. In return, they must serve lunches that meet federal nutrition requirements, as well as offer free or reduced-price lunches to eligible children.

Today, many children in the United States suffer from an over-consumption of calories, fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar. The prevalence of obesity among our nation's youth is at an all-time

high, and some experts estimate that children in the nation's youngest generation may be the first to have shorter lives than their parents. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found that two-thirds of overweight 5- to 10-year-olds already have at least one risk factor for heart disease, such as elevated blood pressure or insulin levels.

The Healthy School Lunch Campaign

In response to these serious health concerns, PCRM—a nonprofit organization that promotes preventive medicine through healthy nutrition—has encouraged lawmakers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and school districts to achieve the PCRM Healthy School Lunch Campaign goal of ensuring that foods served at school promote the health of all children.

Numerous scientific studies have concluded that vegan diets—those built from whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and beans/legumes—satisfy hungry children and offer the most weight-controlling and disease-fighting protection of any dietary pattern. Encouraging children to eat plant-based diets from the start has a positive impact on health and weight, and these positive effects continue into adulthood.

Child Nutrition Act Reauthorization Passed

In 2004, Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, which amends the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. This act expands the fruit and vegetable snack program into more states and Indian reservations, sets requirements for nutrition education programs, and allows schools to provide a non-dairy, calcium-rich beverage as part of a reimbursable meal to a child with a parent's note, rather than requiring one from a physician.

Making the Grade

In reviewing elementary school lunches and nutrition programs using new, more comprehensive criteria, PCRM nutritionists focused on the nutrient content of the menus, menu selections, foods sold in school vending machines, and nutrition education programs. The criteria were grouped into the categories of *Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention*, *Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy*, and *Nutrition Initiatives*. In the *Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention* category, subcategories included the percentage of calories coming from fat and saturated fat, and milligrams of cholesterol based on menu analyses, as well as the frequency of featured vegan entrée selections. *Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy* subcategories included menu analysis results for fiber and vitamin C content, as well as the frequency of low-fat vegetable side dishes, fruit, and the availability of calcium-rich, non-dairy beverage alternatives. The *Nutrition Initiatives* category evaluated nutrition education programs and the presence and contents of vending machines in the schools.

USDA Assessment

The USDA also periodically assesses the nutritional quality of the meals served through the NSLP. In the most recent USDA School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study, published in April 2001, the department reported that many of the nation's school districts do not meet its basic nutritional requirements. (Note that most of the districts in this year's PCRM review did meet the majority of the USDA nutritional requirements.) School districts that do not meet these requirements are encouraged by the USDA to adjust the menu selections they offer, but they are not audited again for five years. Therefore, a school district may, in fact, be serving meals that

contain more than 30 percent of calories from fat and more than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat for a full five years.

Many leading experts believe that the USDA requirements are profoundly inadequate, in part because the department downplays the fact that plant-based meals and menu choices are crucial for health. Consequently, PCRM grades districts based on more substantial criteria. School districts are not yet required by the USDA to serve plant-based meals, offer non-dairy sources of calcium, restrict vending machine sales, or develop nutrition programs to guide children in selecting healthy foods. Therefore, districts that score well in these areas deserve special recognition.

The Top of the Class

To earn an “A” on PCRM’s School Lunch Report Card, school districts must have featured vegan entrée options; low-fat vegetable side dishes; fresh, dried, or canned fruit; and non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages available daily. In addition, the menus must contain less than 30 percent of their calories from fat, less than 10 percent from saturated fat, little or no cholesterol, and—on average—8 to 10 grams of fiber and at least 15 milligrams of vitamin C per meal. School districts must also be initiating nutrition education efforts and teaching healthy eating habits to students through such methods as hands-on healthy cooking, involving children in growing nutritious vegetables, or in-class nutrition education lessons. Finally, an “A” school district either has no vending machines at all in the elementary schools or limits its vending machines to selling healthy foods and beverages such as juice, water, low-fat snacks, fruits, and vegetables.

Encouraging Trends

Each year, PCRM has documented improvement in the types of foods offered to children in elementary schools. Despite USDA barriers to serving healthy vegetarian and vegan entrées in elementary schools (these barriers are detailed below), several districts have made these items more available to students. In fact, eight of the 11 districts surveyed this year had at least one featured vegan entrée in the two-week period reviewed for this report card. The high scorer in this category was San Diego Unified School District, which offered six featured vegan entrées in a two-week period. In addition, some schools—including Fairfax County, Prince George’s County, and Detroit City School District—have started to respond to the demand for calcium-fortified soymilk and other non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages. Because soymilk costs lunch programs more than dairy milk (which is offered to schools at discount prices by the federal government), most districts are forced to offer soymilk à la carte only. Nonetheless, this availability is an important step forward for students. Healthier vending policies were common this year, with seven of the 11 school districts reviewed scoring full points in this area.

Most Improved Player

The “most improved player” award goes to the Clark County School District in Las Vegas, which received a failing grade last year. This year, even with the more comprehensive rating system, the county scored much higher because it has revamped its menu to include a number of featured vegan entrées and more fresh fruits and vegetables. Consequently, school meals in Clark County now have less total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, as well as a sizable amount of fiber.

USDA Initiatives

The USDA has begun to take some initiative in improving the health of our nation's children. Its fruit and vegetable snack program, which provides locally grown produce to 25 schools in a handful of states, has been a huge success and is expanding its coverage. The USDA has also implemented the Team Nutrition program, which helps educate food service staff about preparing healthy foods that taste good. Team Nutrition, which also promotes nutrition education and physical activity for students, has been successful in several states. However, as described below, the USDA still has much work to do to promote the health of all children.

Healthy School Lunch Resolutions

Parents and state governments have been working to find ways to reverse the obesity epidemic by providing healthier food options in schools. Three states—Hawaii, California, and New York—now have healthy school lunch resolutions that have passed handily through state legislatures. These bills encourage schools to offer healthy vegan and vegetarian menu options daily, promote the consumption of local fresh fruits and vegetables, offer healthier choices in vending machines, and improve nutrition education efforts in both the classroom and the cafeteria. In October 2003, the school board for the Los Angeles Unified School District implemented recommendations offered by the California healthy school lunch resolution. The New York State resolution passed in March 2004.

Roadblocks to Health

School districts face a number of challenges to serving vegan meals and non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages and to offering nutrition education to children participating in the NSLP. 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, families, peers, and communities.

Commodity Foods

The USDA commodities program, which supplies food items to the NSLP, puts the needs of U.S. agriculture ahead of the health needs of children and provides few low-fat, plant-based entrée ingredients for use in school lunch menus. Every year, the USDA buys hundreds of millions of pounds of excess beef, pork, milk, and other meat and dairy products to bolster sagging prices in the livestock industry. These high-fat, high-cholesterol products are then distributed at very low cost to the NSLP, where they fuel many children's life-long struggle against obesity and heart disease.

Meanwhile, the USDA neglects to provide the healthiest foods possible. For example, it still costs a school district more than twice as much to provide a high-fiber, low-fat, cholesterol-free veggie burger than it does to provide a higher-fat, fiber-free hamburger. That is because the government subsidizes hamburger and other meats, but not meat alternatives. The same holds true for calcium-rich, non-dairy beverages.

The problem is even more complicated than it appears. Even if soybeans become an agricultural product purchased through the commodities program, a soyfoods manufacturer would have to purchase commodity soybeans and other commodity ingredients to manufacture soymilk, veggie burgers, and other products for these foods to be available at reduced cost to schools. The premier soymilk companies have made a commitment to using organic soybeans that are free of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to make soymilk, tofu, and other products. Organic, non-

GMO agricultural products are not available through the commodities program, so there are many barriers to these healthier foods becoming available to children in schools.

Nutritional Equivalency Standards

Because nutritional equivalency is often narrowly defined by the USDA, many healthy foods do not meet current guidelines. For example, tofu, tempeh, cultured soy (yogurt), soymilk, and soy cheese do not count as meat alternatives because they are not at least 18 percent protein by weight. Therefore, only textured vegetable protein and processed soy protein are permissible meat alternatives. In addition, the USDA has to approve meat alternative products based upon whether they meet USDA requirements of 2 ounces of protein per serving. Most veggie burgers and meat alternative products are not labeled with USDA approval; thus, if a school wants to serve a veggie burger or other meat alternative, the manufacturer must provide the district with documentation that the product meets USDA specifications.

With the current reauthorization of the National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act, a non-dairy beverage that is nutritionally equivalent to cow's milk will now be an allowed beverage option as part of a reimbursable meal for children with a parent's note. However, the USDA will likely take at least a year to set nutritional equivalency standards before this new ruling can be implemented. For this option to benefit children, the USDA must set reasonable standards and make these purchases simple for districts looking to offer a healthy alternative to students. At this point, calcium-fortified soymilk, for example, can cost three times as much as regular milk and has to be special-ordered from a soymilk company. Schools must shoulder the additional financial burden (over the cost of cow's milk) of providing these beverages as an alternative to cow's milk.

The USDA provides very few recipes featuring plant-based entrées, purchasing or distribution support, or any incentive to encourage schools to better serve children's nutritional needs in this way.

Accountability

Although federal law requires schools to ensure that menus meet the U.S. Dietary Guidelines—including creating menus that derive less than 30 percent of their calories from fat—this is not well enforced.

In fact, a large proportion of schools do not meet these USDA requirements, yet they are not held accountable. The most recent School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study showed that, on average, 33 percent of calories in elementary school lunches came from fat, with only 20 percent of schools keeping calories from fat under 30 percent, and only 14 percent keeping calories from saturated fat under the recommended 10 percent. Moreover, even most schools that comply with USDA regulations still offer more fat than should be found in a healthy diet. PCRM's research has demonstrated that a diet deriving 10 to 15 percent of calories from fat offers benefits ranging from cholesterol reduction to weight control.

School food service programs and the children they serve would also benefit from community and family support of healthy eating habits. The eating patterns children learn at home and from the media and peers influence the choices they make while eating at school. School food service directors are under pressure to serve foods that students will eat and enjoy. When children have been raised on chicken nuggets, pepperoni pizza, burgers, and fries, it is difficult to get them to make healthy choices because the healthful foods are unfamiliar and the meaty, fatty choices are what they are accustomed to eating. Ideally, children should be offered only healthy menu options in schools. Schools—such as the Central Alternative High School in Appleton, Wisconsin—that

have made a commitment to serving only healthy options have noted tremendous health, behavioral, and learning benefits among the students they serve.

The food industry could also be part of the solution to childhood obesity. If food producers and manufacturers put their creative and financial might behind creating healthy food products and marketing healthy foods to children and discontinued a long history of concerted efforts to turn children into sugar and fat addicts, schools would have fewer obstacles to overcome in serving nutritious meals. Food companies could cooperate with the USDA to develop child-friendly foods that exceed USDA nutrition guidelines and thus allow schools to offer children low-fat, high-fiber, nutrient-dense foods that they would enjoy.

As the scores below indicate, many of the nation's largest school districts still have a long way to go to achieve an outstanding grade according to PCRM's nutrition criteria. But many are making an effort, and some districts are doing quite well. To succeed fully in offering healthy lunches, schools need help from Congress, the USDA, the food industry, communities, and families.

Review Process

This year's report evaluated school lunch menus, foods available in vending machines, and nutrition education efforts in elementary schools in 11 of the largest school districts in the United States. PCRM nutritionists evaluated foods and programs at districts in the following areas of the country:

- New York, New York (New York City Public School District)
- Las Vegas, Nevada (Clark County School District)
- Detroit, Michigan (Detroit City School District)
- Fairfax, Virginia (Fairfax County Public School District)
- San Diego, California (San Diego City Unified School District)
- Upper Marlboro, Maryland (Prince George's County Public School District)
- Rockville, Maryland (Montgomery Country Public School District)
- Towson, Maryland (Baltimore County Public School District)
- Charlotte, North Carolina (Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District)
- Albuquerque, New Mexico (Albuquerque Public School District)
- Austin, Texas (Austin Independent School District)

Criteria and Grading System

This year's review looked at three different 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: 40 points

This category includes the nutrient composition and frequency of healthy entrée selections that are especially important for the prevention of obesity and obesity-related diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Dietary fat is a rich source of calories, with 9 calories per gram compared to 4 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. Dietary fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol have been linked to high blood pressure, elevated blood lipids, and increased heart disease risk in a number of scientific studies. In addition, being overweight and consuming excess dietary fat puts one at 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 meals that are low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, and provide plant-based (vegan) entrées. Vegan entrées, such as veggie burgers, bean and rice burritos, hummus sandwiches, and veggie chili, taste good, are naturally low in fat and cholesterol-free, and—when offered to children on a regular basis—will help them acquire healthy eating habits to keep them slim and prevent a host of chronic diseases.

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention: 40 points

Subcategory	Data Source	Total Points	Formula
Fat (% of calories)	Menu analysis of one week of lunches or most recent School Meal Initiative audit results	10	<30.0% = 10 points 30-31.0% = 8 points 31.1-32.0% = 6 points 32.1-33.0% = 4 points 33.1-34.0% = 2 points >34.0% = 0 points *2 bonus points for districts between 25 and 27% *4 bonus points for districts at 25% or less
Saturated fat (% of calories)		10	<10.0% = 10 points 10.0 –11.0% = 6 points 11.1-12.0% = 2 points >12.0% = 0 points
Cholesterol (mg)		10	<20 mg = 10 points 20-40 mg = 8 points 41-60 mg = 6 points 61-80 mg = 4 points 81-100 mg = 2 points >100 mg = 0 points
Featured vegan entrée	Recent lunch menu	10	Frequency over 10 days

Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy: 40 points

Separate from nutrition's relationship to disease prevention is the issue of whether meal patterns are meeting nutrient needs and providing 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 the essential nutrients of fiber and vitamin C, daily low-fat vegetable side dishes, fruit, and calcium-rich, non-dairy beverages for children who do not choose to drink milk for health or other reasons. These components are fundamental to a balanced and nutrient-sufficient meal pattern.

Fiber. Fiber is a vital component of a healthy diet. It helps a person feel satiated, improves digestion by providing bulk, helps the body rid itself of excess toxins and wastes, and helps the immune system run at its best. Fiber intake should be at least 30 grams per day, which is why full credit is given in this report for 10 grams of dietary fiber for an average lunch.

Vitamin C. Vitamin C is an important antioxidant and helps boost a child's immune system. Citrus fruits and a variety of vegetables are great sources of vitamin C. The USDA requires that school lunches contain a third of the daily recommended intake of vitamin C, or 15 milligrams per lunch. Full credit of five points is given to lunches that meet this requirement. All the school districts in this year's report card met the vitamin C requirement.

Fruits and Vegetables. Low-fat vegetable side dishes and fruit are essential to meals that are considered nutritionally adequate and promote the health of children. Adults who eat lots 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. Dark green leafy vegetables, such as broccoli, collards, kale, mustard and turnip greens, chicory, and bok choy, are especially good sources of important nutrients for children. Dark yellow and orange vegetables, such as carrots, winter squash, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin, provide the powerful antioxidant beta-carotene. 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 with low-fat Italian salad dressing—and fresh, dried, or canned fruit in juice, children begin to develop a taste for these items. In this review, one point was awarded for each day schools served a low-fat vegetable side-dish, and another point was awarded for each day there was whole, dried, or canned fruit available on the elementary menu over a 10-day period.

Calcium-Rich, Non-Dairy Beverages. Calcium-rich, non-dairy 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. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, approximately 70 percent of African Americans, 90 percent of Asian Americans, 53 percent of Hispanic Americans, and 74 percent of Native Americans are lactose intolerant. Numerous scientific studies link the consumption of cow's milk to obesity, anemia, ear infections, constipation, respiratory problems, heart disease, and some cancers. Due to the health concerns associated with dairy product consumption, cow's milk with added lactase, such as LACTAID milk, is not a suitable alternative. The NSLP currently does not offer an alternative beverage to cow's milk to all children as an option on the lunch line.

With the 2004 reauthorization of the National School Lunch Act and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, children who require or request an alternative to cow's milk will be able to receive an

alternative as long as they have a note from a parent and as long as the milk substitute is considered to be nutritionally equivalent to cow's milk according to standards set by the USDA. This is a step forward, however small, as the previous policy required a doctor's note in order for a child to receive a non-dairy beverage in the school lunch program as part of a reimbursable meal. 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 these beverages in school lunch programs, even if just à la carte. In this review, PCRMR awarded up to five points to school districts that provide calcium-rich juices or non-dairy milks to students on a daily basis.

Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy: 40 points

Subcategory	Data Source	Total Points	Formula
Fiber	Menu analysis of one week of lunches or most recent School Meal Initiative audit results	10	Actual grams
Vitamin C		5	0-5 points based on percentage of 15 mg requirement met
Vegetable Side Dish	Recent lunch menu	10	Frequency over 10-day period
Fruit	Recent lunch menu	10	Frequency over 10-day period
Calcium-rich, non-dairy beverages	Food service director	5	Not available = 0 points Available à la carte or with a doctor's note only = 3 points Available on a regular basis in the lunch program = 5 points

Nutrition Initiatives: 20 points

To truly promote health and ward off obesity, schools must teach children about nutrition. It is also critical for districts to include only healthy vending foods when vending machines are present. 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. School districts were awarded two points for every innovative nutrition program in place to assist elementary school children. A district could receive up to 10 points for innovative nutrition programs. Examples of such programs include school gardens where children learn to grow produce, hands-on cooking classes or cooking demonstrations with taste tests for students to try healthy dishes, and in-class nutrition activities.

School vending machines that sell unhealthy snack foods and beverages compete with healthier foods in a child's daily energy intake. It is important that schools that rely on vending sales to fund extracurricular activities sell only low-fat snack items, juice, water, and nutrient-rich items in order to teach children about proper nutrition in school. For this portion of the review, elementary schools that have vending machines were given points if juice and water, rather than soda, were available; if snack foods were limited to low-fat items; and if fruit and vegetable snacks were sold. Schools received up to 10 points for healthier food offerings in vending machines; schools without vending machines were given full credit for not providing high-sugar, high-fat items to children.

Nutrition Initiatives: 20 points

Subcategory	Data Source	Total Points	Formula
Nutrition education programs	Food service director	10	2 points given for each program available
Vending machine sales	Food service director	10	4 points for beverage sales limited to only healthy options 4 points for only low-fat snacks available 2 points for fruit and/or vegetable snack options Full credit given to districts without vending machines (10 points)

Grading Scale

Percentage	Grade
97-100	A+
93-96	A
90-92	A-
87-89	B+
83-86	B
80-82	B-
77-79	C+
73-76	C
70-72	C-
67-69	D+
63-66	D
60-62	D-
<60	F

The Report Card

District	Score	Grade
Fairfax County Public School District (Virginia)	84.7	B
San Diego Unified School District (California)	80.9	B-
Detroit City School District (Michigan)	80.4	B-
Austin Independent School District (Texas)	77.6	C+
Clark County School District (Nevada)	77.5	C+
New York City Public School District (New York)	75.0	C
Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District (North Carolina)	75.0	C
Prince George's County Public School District (Maryland)	71.7	C-
Montgomery County Public School District (Maryland)	70.4	C-
Baltimore County Public School District (Maryland)	65.6	D
Albuquerque Public School District (New Mexico)	59.8	F

Individual Districts

Fairfax County Public School District: B

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	28.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	36.7
Nutrition Initiatives	20.0
TOTAL	84.7

The Fairfax County Public School District is the 14th largest district in the country, with more than 162,000 students. The review examined 10 days of the August 2004 elementary school menu and nutrient data from the district's September 2004 nutrient analysis.

The Fairfax County elementary lunch selections and nutrition programs achieved the highest score of any district reviewed this year. Once a week, children can choose a featured vegan entrée such as a veggie burger or spaghetti and breadstick with marinara sauce. A variety of fresh fruits and vegetables are available daily, and calcium-fortified juices are available for children who do not drink dairy milk. This year, the county will offer Silk soymilk upon request as an à la carte item.

Nutrition education programs and vending machine policies in the Fairfax County elementary schools are geared to promoting healthy eating habits. The district's food and nutrition services department uses classroom time to educate K-6 students on the importance of healthy food choices and exercise. By getting involved in hands-on food preparation, doing tasting activity puzzles, and taking home nutrition activities for the family, children learn the value of nutrition right from the start. Moreover, only a third of the county's elementary schools have vending machines, and these offer only juice and water.

Fairfax can improve its score by increasing the frequency of featured vegan entrée selections; this will raise the fiber content and lower the cholesterol content of the lunch menus.

San Diego Unified School District: B-

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	32.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	30.9
Nutrition Initiatives	18.0
TOTAL	80.9

The San Diego Unified School District is the 17th largest district in the country, with more than 140,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the district's fall 2004 elementary school menu and nutrient data from this menu.

The San Diego elementary lunch and nutrition programs have improved significantly in the last few years. By the end of school year 2003-2004, all 130 elementary schools had full salad and fruit bars, and the fall 2004 menu features vegan entrées three days a week, including a bean burrito, a loaded baked potato, and a veggie burger. The food service director is dedicated to providing healthy options that go well beyond the USDA requirements and is currently looking into providing vanilla and chocolate soymilk, vegan sloppy joes, and cholesterol-free veggie hot

dogs in the elementary schools. Providing these additional options will likely give the San Diego school district an “A” in the future.

Nutrition education in the San Diego schools is supplemented with a salad bar and fruit bar loaded with nutrient-rich fresh produce. A “Harvest of the Month” item is featured on the lunch menus and in the lunchroom. The Kids Choice Café newsletters and promotion in the San Diego elementary schools teach children about healthy fruits and vegetables and provide nutrition and cookbook reading lists as well as other fun activities each month. San Diego elementary schools have no vending machines, which helps children focus on the healthy selections available in the cafeteria.

Detroit City School District: B-

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	29.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	35.4
Nutrition Initiatives	16.0
TOTAL	80.4

The Detroit City School District is the 11th largest district in the country, with more than 173,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the district’s September 2004 elementary school menu and nutrient data from August through September 2004.

In last year’s review, the Detroit elementary school menu rated higher than any other menu analyzed because vegan burgers were available three days a week. This year, one to two featured vegan entrées were still available each week, including veggie burgers and veggie chili, but the frequency has diminished as the district has encountered some of the roadblocks to providing healthy foods described above.

Financial considerations as well as logistical issues have limited how often healthier entrées are served. For example, while delicious veggie burgers are readily available in supermarkets, the district has had trouble getting an “approved” veggie burger that is both tasty and attractive to the children. The oval-shaped burger now used meets the district’s cost constraints and has the requisite 2 ounces of protein, but round patties are more acceptable to children. On the other hand, the district’s weighted average lunch has 8.36 grams of fiber, which is close to the 10-grams-per-meal goal and is higher than many of the other menus in this year’s review. Detroit is also one of the few districts serving calcium-fortified juices on a regular basis.

There are no vending machines available to students in the elementary schools, and children learn about healthy eating with Spike, ARAMARK’s nutrition mascot, and through nutrition newsletters and USDA Team Nutrition programs such as “Fruits and Vegetables Galore...Helping Kids Eat More.” Detroit could improve its grade by featuring more vegan entrées and initiating hands-on cooking or in-class nutrition activities with children.

Austin Independent School District: C+

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	32.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	31.6
Nutrition Initiatives	14.0
TOTAL	77.6

The Austin Independent School District is the 39th largest district in the country, with more than 78,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the May 2004 elementary school menu and nutrient data from that menu.

Compared to the other school districts in this year’s review, the Austin elementary school menu had the lowest level of cholesterol—17 milligrams—and lowest percentage of calories coming from saturated fat—8 percent—per average meal. Austin also received two bonus points for having just 27 percent of calories from total fat. These healthy scores reflect daily offerings of a wide variety of low-fat vegetable dishes such as seasoned pinto beans, a daily garden salad, and steamed broccoli. However, Austin lost several points for never featuring a vegan entrée such as a bean and rice burrito or veggie burger.

Austin could also use improvement in the area of nutrition education programs aimed at teaching students to make healthy food choices. Currently, the district’s elementary schools have begun to use USDA’s Team Nutrition programs.

Clark County School District: C+

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	32.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	33.5
Nutrition Initiatives	12.0
TOTAL	77.5

The Clark County School District is the seventh largest district in the country, with more than 256,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the September 2004 elementary school menu and nutrient data from that menu.

Clark County made a major overhaul to its menu over the past year. On PCRM’s 2003 School Lunch Report Card, the county scored one of the lowest grades because it offered no regular vegan entrées and made vegan entrée options available only on special request. This year, however, there are two vegan entrées featured each week, including vegan sloppy joes, veggie pot pies, and garden veggie burgers. The September menu analysis also has one of the highest fiber contents of any menu in this review—9.51 grams per average lunch. In addition, Clark County menus have just 26.91 percent of calories from fat, which earned the district two bonus points.

Nutrition education programs are in the works in the Las Vegas elementary schools, but they have not yet been implemented. Consequently, this is the area in which Clark County lost the most points. However, once these education programs are in place to help children choose the already healthy options available, Clark County’s score will increase.

New York City Public School District: C

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	28.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	31.0
Nutrition Initiatives	16.0
TOTAL	75.0

The New York City Public School District is the largest district in the country, with more than 1,077,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the June 2004 Manhattan elementary school menu and nutrient data from the district’s 2000 School Meal Initiative audit.

At the end of school year 2002-2003, motivated by the high percentage of obese children in the city, the New York City Public School District embarked on efforts to improve the health quality of its lunch menu items and vending machine selections. As a result, elementary school students now see featured vegan entrées such as veggie patties with wheat buns and vegetarian “chicken” nuggets at least once a week on the regular menu. The Seventh-Day Adventist menu, which is designed for children in this religious group, offers even more healthy vegan entrées. The standard menu also features a variety of vegetable side dishes, including collard greens and plantains, in addition to daily seasonal fruit selections.

The school district works hard to educate children about nutrition and health. Vending machines now contain only juices, water, and a variety of approved snack items such as oat bran pretzels and soy crisps. The schools have partnered with New York State apple growers and other farmers to provide fresh, nutrient-dense produce to the lunch program; they have also brought in a professional gourmet chef to prepare healthy and tasty food for the students. More improvements are likely since the state legislature recently unanimously approved the New York State Healthy School Lunch Resolution, which urges schools to offer daily vegan entrées, even more nutrition education, and farm-to-school programs.

The areas where the New York City Public School District lost points in this review included fiber and cholesterol content of the menus and the unavailability of a non-dairy, calcium-rich beverage for children who do not drink regular milk. New York City could boost its score by increasing featured vegan entrée selections, which would naturally increase fiber content and decrease cholesterol content.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District: C

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	27.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	32.0
Nutrition Initiatives	16.0
TOTAL	75.0

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District is the 26th largest district in the country, with more than 109,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the March 2004 elementary school lunch menu and recent menu analysis nutrient data.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg elementary schools have an outstanding number and variety of fruits and vegetables available every day, including black-eyed peas, squash and onions, vegetable soup, hot apples, baked beans, spinach, and fresh fruit. The schools are also well under the recommended upper limits of fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol, and each meal has an average of

7 grams of fiber. Where the Charlotte-Mecklenburg menu loses points, however, is in the availability of featured vegan entrées and non-dairy, calcium-rich beverages. A vegan spaghetti entrée is currently offered every other week, but increasing plant-based entrées and making a calcium-fortified juice or soymilk available will greatly improve Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s score.

Although there are no vending machines available to the students, nutrition education programs with student participation are needed to help the children appreciate and understand the role of nutritious food in health.

Prince George’s County Public School District: C-

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	25.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	38.7
Nutrition Initiatives	8.0
TOTAL	71.7

The Prince George’s County Public School District is the 18th largest district in the country, with more than 135,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the May 2004 elementary school lunch menu, School Meal Initiative audit results from 2002, and nutrient data from a recent menu analysis.

The county’s elementary school menus had a fair number of nutrient-rich seasonal fruit and vegetable options and were below the recommended upper limits on fat and saturated fat. Although the menus were too high in cholesterol (71 milligrams per average lunch), they had the highest level of fiber of any menu reviewed this year—9.69 grams. In addition, Prince George’s County is one of the few school systems reviewed that have a calcium-fortified juice available to students as an alternative to milk.

The main areas for improvement include adding featured vegan entrées, hands-on nutrition education programs, and tighter restrictions on vending machine sales. A vegan bean chili is currently featured on the menu, but it is offered just once over a two-week period. Nutrition posters and nutrient information are available to students, but active participation in nutrition education hasn’t yet been planned.

Montgomery County Public School District: C-

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	31.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	25.4
Nutrition Initiatives	14.0
TOTAL	70.4

The Montgomery County Public School District is the 19th largest district in the country, with approximately 139,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the March 2004 elementary school lunch menu, School Meal Initiative audit results from 2002, and nutrient data from the March 2004 menu analysis.

Although Montgomery County had the lowest percentage of calories from fat of any of the districts reviewed this year—24.9 percent—and received four bonus points for this, the only plant-based entrée offered was a penne pasta with tomato sauce. Furthermore, the vegetable side

dishes are often potato dishes, which are not nearly as high in nutrients as some of the more colorful vegetables. By increasing the frequency of high-fiber entrée items such as bean chili, veggie burgers, and vegetable burritos and low-fat, colorful veggie side dishes, Montgomery County could score much higher in the future.

Montgomery County does not have any vending machines, but it also has not yet initiated hands-on nutrition education programs. Nutrition is currently taught only in health education classes; if that education was expanded to include more active student participation, the quality of nutrition knowledge in the county's schools would improve significantly.

Baltimore County Public School District: D

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	26.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	27.6
Nutrition Initiatives	12.0
TOTAL	65.6

The Baltimore County Public School District is the 23rd largest district in the country, with more than 108,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the August-September 2004 elementary school lunch menu, School Meal Initiative audit results from 2002, and nutrient data from the December 2003 menu analysis.

Baltimore County received two bonus points for having its fat calories at 26.62 percent of total, but had a surprisingly high level of cholesterol at 62 milligrams per average lunch. Nearly every day's menu includes a low-fat vegetable side dish such as a tossed salad or veggies and dip, and fresh fruit is available daily. However, the elementary school menu never featured a vegan entrée; the addition of healthy plant-based entrées such as veggie burgers, bean and rice burritos, and vegetable pasta would not only decrease the cholesterol content, but also increase the amount of fiber in the meals, which is currently only 5.6 grams.

Efforts to educate the children on healthy eating habits have not begun. Once healthier entrée options and hands-on and in-class nutrition activities are provided, Baltimore County will improve its grade tremendously.

Albuquerque Public School District: F

Obesity and Chronic Disease Prevention	22.0
Health Promotion and Nutrition Adequacy	27.8
Nutrition Initiatives	10.0
TOTAL	59.8

The Albuquerque Public School District is the 34th largest district in the country, with more than 88,000 students. The review looked at 10 days of the September 2004 elementary school lunch menu and nutrient data from this menu.

Although most days include healthy fresh fruit such as New Mexico farm-fresh watermelon and a low-fat vegetable side dish, Albuquerque was the only district in this report whose menus did not meet the requirement of deriving less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. Albuquerque also lost a significant number of points in the featured vegan entrée category and the vending

machine restriction category. The district's nutrition coordinator is looking into restricting vending beverages to just water, which will greatly improve Albuquerque's score. The district could also add a daily featured vegan entrée, such as spaghetti with marinara sauce, bean burritos, vegan sloppy joes, or lentil stew. Not only would this increase the scores for vegan entrées, it would also decrease the level of saturated fat.

Nutrition education programs are plentiful in the district's elementary schools. The nutrition coordinator teaches classes on fruits and vegetables, and six elementary schools (soon to be eight) have Kids Cook! programs in which students learn about healthy nutrition and food preparation through an integrated curriculum of 10 hands-on lessons taught by food educators.

Summary

As demonstrated by the 11 large school districts surveyed this year, the National School Lunch Program has a long way to go to make the honor roll. In the future, PCRM nutritionists and physicians hope to see the USDA and Congress making decisions that enable schools to offer students food selections that clearly will help prevent obesity and promote long-term good health. Significant changes in funding, regulations, and support are needed for the NSLP to be part of the solution to the childhood obesity problem.

Some encouraging trends were observed in this year's review, and most districts are making efforts to improve the foods served and the nutrition education offered to children in schools. All the schools surveyed in this year's report met the USDA requirement for percentage of calories from fat; three-quarters of the schools had a healthy fruit option daily; and more than half had a low-fat vegetable option daily. Seventy-three percent of the schools surveyed offered at least one featured vegan entrée in a two-week period, and three schools had at least three vegan entrées in that period. Calcium-rich, non-dairy beverages are becoming more readily available in à la carte lines, and children will soon be able to request this option with a parent's note describing their dietary need. Three states have approved resolutions encouraging the provision of healthier foods in schools. Finally, vending machine restrictions and nutrition education programs are becoming more readily available.