

# School Food Environment: Frequently Asked Questions

## 1. **How can teachers model healthy behaviors?**

Research shows that teachers who have healthy lifestyles tend to incorporate healthy lifestyle messages into their teaching, so encouraging teachers to adopt healthy lifestyles is important. Schools should encourage and promote staff wellness. Teachers should be encouraged to join students for lunch and integrate positive nutrition messages into their lesson plans.

## 2. **What challenges has HSC encountered with food vendors?**

The challenges that we have encountered working with food vendors to improve the school food environment are varied and seem to depend on existing policies and contracts within the school district and the flexibility of the food provider. Generally speaking, many vendors are cooperative and want to meet the needs and demands of their customers. In general, the challenges that face food vendors are the small challenges that face in-house school food operations:

1. **The funding formula:** The federal government reimburses schools \$2.32 for each lunch served. With other funding shortages that schools face, most food service programs are expected to breakeven or contribute to overhead. It is hard to do that with the federal reimbursement. To help schools work within this budget, schools can buy commodities from the federal government. Traditionally, items offered via the commodity program are higher in fat, reinforcing the difficulty of offering a healthy meal.
2. **Trained staff:** The economics of school food programs make it difficult to offer employees good paying jobs with benefits. Consequently, schools have a hard time attracting skilled staff. This in turn encourages food service staff to rely on “heat and serve food”
3. **Facility Limitations:** Often schools do not have the facilities to offer good healthy meals. For years schools have been built with only warming kitchens or with only fryers. We have been working on a Healthy, High Performing School Construction Guidance Document which includes recommendations for building kitchens that allow healthy food to be cooked.
4. **Poor choices of processed food items:** While we would love to see “home cooked” meals offered in schools, the physical and financial limitations schools face lead to a reliance on a certain amount of processed food, at least in the short term. Although food manufacturers are responding to the demand for healthier foods, “healthy” processed foods are still generally unavailable.

## 3. **Does improving access to fresh & fruit vegetables through something like a salad bar really improve eating habits?**

Improving access to fruits and vegetables through venues like a salad bar is most effective at improving children’s eating habits when the change is accompanied by nutrition education and promotion of the change.

## 4. **What has been the financial impact for schools that have taken steps to improve food and beverage offerings in their schools?**

The financial impact of these types of changes varies depending on the approach/strategy that is employed. However, schools can increase the availability of healthier products and maintain or increase its revenue. A USDA publication, entitled “Making it Happen: School Nutrition Success Stories” shares success stories of schools that have taken steps to improve school nutrition and have fared well financially.