



Fluid Milk in School Meal Programs



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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OVERVIEW

Because of milk's unique nutrient profile, it has been an integral part of school meals for close to a century. School meals are designed to help meet nutrient needs and teach children healthy habits; school meal composition has evolved as public health challenges have evolved. Low-fat and fat-free milk consumption is recommended by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and health professionals, and it can be difficult to replace milk's nutrient package with other foods. National Dairy Council® has long been a supporter of improving child health and wellness, most recently through Fuel Up to Play 60, which encourages students to consume nutrient-rich foods and achieve at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. School meals and the milk provided can help children to get the nutrients they need. In SY 2014, over 7.6 billion meals were served in schools through lunch, breakfast, after-school suppers and summer feeding programs.¹ Over 15.8 million children are from food insecure households and may be vulnerable to health and cognitive development challenges.² Food insecure school children, who may not have access in any other way, can depend on school meals to help meet nutrient needs and address these issues.

MILK'S ROLE IN SCHOOL MEALS

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) both operate in the overwhelming majority of U.S. schools, but fewer students participate in the SBP. Each day in 2013, about 30.7 million students ate a school lunch, while 13.2 million ate breakfast at school.³ Regulations under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 specify the mix of meal components such as fruits and vegetables, grains, milk and meat. These regulations vary among the different meal programs which include not only lunch and breakfast, but also suppers and summer meals. For the first time, new regulations also set standards for Smart Snacks. Milk is required to be offered with each school meal as either low-fat or fat-free milk and is a beverage option under the Smart Snacks regulations. If milk is flavored, however, it must be fat-free.⁴

The majority of school-aged children do not meet current recommendations for milk and milk products,⁵ and school meals are an opportunity to increase milk consumption. The current environment presents several challenges to meeting the goal of increasing students' milk consumption in schools. Among these are:

- Declining average daily participation in the NSLP because if students do not eat in the cafeteria they generally do not drink milk.
- It is unknown whether students may tend to take milk less often because of the requirement that flavored milk be fat-free (before 2012-2013, low-fat flavored milk was the most popular milk offered in schools).⁶⁻⁷
- For students with lactose intolerance, lactose-free milk is an alternative, though schools may choose to offer substitute beverages in some cases.
- Research has shown that the quality of students' milk-drinking experience can have a significant impact on how much they drink, and an improved experience can even boost participation in the NSLP and SBP.⁸ Attractive containers, proper refrigeration, additional flavors and attractive merchandising are the keys.⁸

MILK'S ROLE IN CHILDREN'S DIETS

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend three daily servings of low-fat or fat-free dairy for Americans 9 years and older (2 1/2 servings for younger school-age children).⁹ Health professional organizations such as the American Heart Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics also recommend children drink low-fat and fat-free milk each day.¹⁰⁻¹¹ Milk is the number one food source of three out of four nutrients identified by the Dietary Guidelines as lacking in the diets of most Americans.^{9, 12} Milk is the leading source of nine essential nutrients for children 2-18 years old.¹² Moreover, studies have shown that it can be difficult to get the same nutrients affordably without consuming milk and milk products.^{13, 14}

Drinking white and flavored milk can help support meeting nutrient needs, and flavored milk is associated with improved diet quality in children.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ In their 2009 scientific statement on Dietary Sugars Intake and Cardiovascular Health, the American Heart Association recognized that flavored milk can help to improve the quality of children's diets with no adverse effects on weight status.¹⁸ Of all the foods that contribute added sugars to the diets of U.S. children, flavored milk contributes about 4% on average.¹⁹ The calorie content of flavored milks in schools has consistently declined in recent years, largely because of reformulation that has reduced sugar content.²⁰⁻²¹ In the school context, about 66% of milk served is flavored.²⁰ Research has found declines in total milk consumption when flavored milk is completely removed from schools, which may lead to reduced nutrient intakes.²²⁻²³ Likewise, if the shift to fat-free flavored milk is accompanied by significant reductions in total milk intake, reduced intakes of key shortfall nutrients by school meal participants may be the result.

CURRENT ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL MILK CONSUMPTION AND POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

USDA does not measure school milk consumption directly, so consumption must be approximated by extrapolating from the number of meals served. Lower average daily participation in the NSLP appears to have reduced milk consumed in school lunches by about 4.3% since 2012.^{1, 24} A survey of school nutrition directors showed that these professionals believe their students like school milk, and felt that the availability of flavored milk was important for maintaining milk consumption levels.²⁵ In taste panels, students in four distinct geographic markets generally gave lower marks to fat-free flavored school milk than to corresponding low-fat flavored milk sold at retail.²⁶

An increase in the number of students in school feeding programs is associated with increased milk consumption in schools.²⁷ Higher participation in these programs would likely lead to significant increases in milk consumption. In addition, the provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act that allows some low-income schools to offer breakfast and lunch at no charge could also raise participation in these programs along with increased emphasis on After-School Suppers and Summer Feeding. All these school meal opportunities provide nutrient-rich meals (including milk) for America's children, particularly those from food insecure households.

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