

## Healthy Eating in Schools: Policy Recommendations

### Background and Rationale

Alberta Education supports healthy schools using the comprehensive school health approach.

*“Healthy Schools is a commitment by governments to support student health and learning outcomes by encouraging schools to adopt a comprehensive school health approach to promote student wellness through increased levels of physical activity, healthy eating and positive mental health.” - Alberta Education*

Promoting a healthy food environment in schools can help support healthier eating habits among children and youth. Healthier children may show improved readiness to learn<sup>1</sup>. Children spend more time in school than any other setting, thus schools have an opportunity to:

- encourage healthy attitudes towards food
- recognize the role food plays in students’ emotional, social and physical development
- encourage the school community in the promotion of lifestyles that support healthy eating

Children’s eating behaviours are determined by many factors, including access to healthy foods and beverages, cultural preferences, the time and space available for meals, peer and adult role modeling of healthy eating and food marketing. Research shows that children and youth do not meet the Canada’s Food Guide (CFG) recommendations for vegetables and fruit, and milk and alternatives. In addition, they often have high intakes of sodium, sugar and unhealthy fats, which do not support health<sup>1-3</sup>. A healthy eating pattern is important for healthy growth and development, and the prevention of chronic disease later in life<sup>1</sup>.



School jurisdictions and schools can show commitment to healthy schools and specifically healthy food environments by developing and implementing healthy eating policies<sup>a</sup>. It is recommended that healthy eating policies consider a variety of factors that influence food choices among children and families.

**This document is intended to help guide schools and school jurisdictions that choose to develop comprehensive and evidence-based healthy eating policies for foods provided in school settings. It is not intended to apply to lunches/snacks sent from home for individual students. Healthy eating policies should be written, communicated and implemented in ways that will not stigmatize individual students or families for food and beverage choices.**

The following recommended strategies are based on available evidence, including the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth (ANGCY) and current school jurisdiction nutrition policies in Alberta. Schools can choose strategies based on the local needs identified and results from an assessment of the food environment.

<sup>a</sup> For more information about developing and implementing healthy school policies visit <http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page7124.aspx>

## Recommended Strategies

# Foods and beverages

The ANGCY provides specific recommendations on the types of foods that should be offered for each school level. These guidelines can be shared with families to support healthy eating in students, but they should not be used to assess food brought from home as part of individual lunches and snacks. Meeting these recommendations may be challenging based on the type of foods and beverages offered in the school (e.g., meals, fruit and vegetable snack programs, tuck shop, canteen), how frequently foods are offered, foods available in the marketplace, and on infrastructure, equipment and other resource limitations. It is recommended that schools align as closely as possible to the ANGCY.

**\*Please note: This strategy applies to foods and beverages sold or provided in schools.**

School Level	“Choose Most Often”	“Choose Sometimes”	“Choose Least Often”
Elementary	100% of food	Not recommended	Not recommended
Junior High	At least 60% of food	40% of food or less	Not recommended
Senior High	At least 50% of food	50% of food or less	Not recommended

Consider the following:

- Multi-level schools (i.e. kindergarten to grade 12) should align with the most conservative recommendations. Refer to the ANGCY for descriptions of each food category.
- Policies should apply to all food offered to students by the school, outside food service providers or volunteer parents, including:
  - cafeterias, kiosks, canteens and vending machines
  - breakfast, lunch and snack programs
  - sport events, fundraisers and special lunch days

Canada’s Food Guide (CFG) may also be used to inform healthy eating policies:

- Provide foods from all four food groups of CFG in the cafeteria and/or canteen, and breakfast and lunch programs. Refer to CFG for descriptions of food groups and serving sizes.
- Offer healthy foods based on the CFG in vending machines and during school events.

## Resources

[Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth](#)  
[Canada’s Food Guide](#)  
[Healthy Eating Starts Here](#)  
[Healthy Vending Toolkit](#)  
[School Breakfast Program Toolkit](#)  
[School Food Vendor Checklist](#)  
[School Menu Checklist](#)  
[Snack Shack Manual](#)

# Marketing healthy food choices

Food marketing plays a key role in influencing children's food choices<sup>1</sup>. To support students, staff and visitors to choose healthy foods, consider the following strategies:

- Ensure that foods in the “Choose Most Often” food category are competitively priced relative to other foods.
- Ensure that foods in the “Choose Most Often” food category are visibly and easily accessible to students.
- Have nutrition information available for food and beverages sold in the cafeteria/canteens and vending machines.
- Limit advertisement and promotion of food and beverages in the “Choose Sometimes” and “Choose Least Often” food categories.

## Resources

[Marketing Healthy Food Choices](#)  
[Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth](#)

# Eating environment

The eating environment includes the physical space and time students are given to eat their lunch as well as the social culture of the school. This can influence the eating behaviours of children and youth. Children and youth are more likely to have healthy attitudes towards food and eating when meals and snacks are eaten in an appropriate physical space with a pleasant social atmosphere<sup>1</sup>. Consider the following:

- Schedule lunch breaks that provide adequate amount of time (at least 20 minutes) for students to eat their lunch.
- Schedule lunch breaks so that recreation time does not compete with mealtimes in elementary schools (e.g., recess before lunch).
- Have a designated physical space that encourages social interaction for students while eating lunch.
- Provide professional learning to food services staff and lunch supervisors to support them in having positive conversations with students around healthy eating.
- Limit distractions, such as screen time, during snack and lunch breaks.
- Allow and encourage students to carry water bottles during instructional time.
- Include healthy choices during staff meetings and professional development days.

## Resources

[Healthy Eating Starts Here: Creating Healthy Eating Environments in Schools](#)  
[Reverse Lunch Toolkit: Play Before Lunch](#)  
[Healthy Eating at Work](#)

# Food as rewards

Using food as a reward for children may contribute to unhealthy eating behaviours<sup>1</sup>. In addition, foods offered as rewards are often less healthy options. Consider the following:

- If using rewards, choose non-food items.
- Do not withhold food as a punishment (e.g., withholding snack time because of poor behaviour).

# Fundraising

Many schools fundraise to supplement school budgets. Food-based fundraisers often involve the sale of less healthy food items. Include healthy fundraising as part of your policy. Consider the following:

- Fundraise using non-food based items or activities.
- If food-based fundraisers are used:
  - limit foods in the “Choose Least Often” category to no more than one fundraiser per year.
  - choose food items from the “Choose Most Often” or “Choose Sometimes” food categories.

## Resources

[Healthy School Fundraising](#)  
[Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth](#)

# Special events

Special events, classroom parties, sport and school events are fun ways to learn and celebrate. Schools can role model healthy eating during these special events. Consider the following:

- If a meal is offered, offer foods from the four food groups of CFG and the ANGCY “Choose Most Often” and “Choose Sometimes” food categories.
- If snacks are offered, offer snacks from the ANGCY “Choose Most Often” and “Choose Sometimes” food categories.
- Share the school’s healthy eating policy with parents and volunteers who may bring food into school on special occasions (e.g., birthdays, class parties, potlucks) to ensure expectations are clear.

## Resources

[Special Lunch Days](#)  
[Sports Nutrition for Youth: A Handbook for Coaches](#)  
[Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth](#)

# Nutrition education

Promoting healthy eating through age appropriate curriculum activities and opportunities outside the classroom is another strategy to consider. Nutrition education should be integrated into all aspects of the school environment. Consider the following:

- Ensure the nutrition education provided to students is aligned with outcomes in the Health/Career and Life Management Programs of Study.
- Use evidence-based tools and resources.

## Resources

[Healthy Eating Starts Here: School Nutrition Curriculum Based Lesson Plans](#)  
[Nutrition Activities in Any Classroom](#)  
[Nutrition Bites](#)

## Sources

1. Healthy Alberta. (2012). Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth: A Childcare, School and Recreation/Community Resource Manual. Retrieved from: <http://healthyalberta.ca/HealthyEating/ANGCY.htm>
2. Statistics Canada. (2015). Fruit and vegetable consumption, 2014. Retrieved from from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2015001/article/14182-eng.htm>
3. Garriguet. (2007). Canadians' eating habits. Health Reports. Vol. 18, no. 2. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-003. p. 17–32. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2006004/article/habit/9609-eng.pdf>.