**NYC Healthy School Food Alliance**

**NYC School Food FAQ**

**Developed with Stephen O’Brien, OFNS**

**What menus does the DOE offer K-8?**

There are three main menus offered for K-8. The [classic](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/public/PDF_Handler.ashx?t=m&id=5291&name=Pre-K+-+8+Lunch+Menu) menu, [alternative menu](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/public/PDF_Handler.ashx?t=m&id=5295&name=Pre-K+-+8+Alternative+Lunch+Menu) and [vegetarian menu](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/public/PDF_Handler.ashx?t=m&id=5294&name=Pre-K+-+8+Vegetarian+Lunch+Menu). All schools receive the classic menu, a fast-food styled menu of popcorn chicken, mozzarella sticks, burgers, pizza and Tostitos tacos bowls, unless otherwise requested by the principal.

**What is the Alternative Menu?**

The Alternative Menu was originally developed by Wellness in the Schools as a more scratch-cooked menu with more plant-forward options. Originally called the WITS menu, it has since been changed to the Alternative Menu. It includes two scratch cooked items (scratch-cooked items are homemade dishes, such as veggie chili, veggie fried rice, zucchini parm, chickpea tagine, and more—meals that are made by people, not from bag to oven, not heat and serve fast food. There are three vegetarian items on the menu per week.

**How can my school adopt the Alternative Menu? Does it cost more?**

Your principal must request the alternative menu from your school food manager. The change will take about a month. It does not cost more. It still has Meatless Monday, pizza and burger day, so it’s not all that different but it does offer less processed food and more home-cooked food.

Research shows that highly processed foods are not only harming our health, but creating lifelong patterns of eating fast food outside of school, which leads to obesity and related chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and hypertension, all on the rise in kids.

Also, [according to a report from the Brookings Institute,](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/05/03/how-the-quality-of-school-lunch-affects-students-academic-performance/) when a school contracts with a healthy lunch company, students at the school score better on end-of-year academic tests. On average, student test scores were about 4 percentile points higher. Not only that, the test score increases are about 40 percent larger for students who qualify for reduced-price or free school lunches.

**What is my school doesn’t have a full kitchen, can I still get the Alternative Menu?**

Yes! It will be brought in from a nearby school.

**What if the kids don’t eat the Alternative Menu?**

Good question! Since the foods may be unfamiliar to children, and they may not eat lunch. If participation drops, the principal may switch back so we do recommend having school wide by-in and programming to support the menu.

We recommend that parents get involved in promoting the menu before the switch, and continue to do tastings and send home flyers encouraging participation. [Coalition for Healthy School Food](https://www.healthyschoolfood.org/) will come to your school and do free tastings; [Wellness in the Schools](http://www.wellnessintheschools.org/) also does cook camps to help train your kitchen staff. Some schools send home the menu each month and make a game out of it, asking kids to play menu Tic Tac Toe, choosing three meals a month to try; other schools send home recipes (there are some on the [website](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/menusandrecipes/menus.htm#recipes) but others can be requested from your school food manager) and encourage families to make the meals at home so kids are used to it.

**I know nutrition education will help kids eat more unfamiliar food, as well fruits and vegetables, and it will improve academic performance, but I don’t know how to get programming into my school. Help!**

Yes, hands-on culinary and nutrition education is very important to bring into your school. According to a [National Wellness Policy Study](https://www.ihrp.uic.edu/files/NWPS_Working_on_Wellness_District_Report_SY2014-15.pdf), well-implemented nutrition education can help children obtain healthy weights and BMIs, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, develop positive attitudes towards those foods and improve academic performance. Yet r[esearch published by the Tisch Food Center](https://www.tc.columbia.edu/media/centers/tisch/NEP-Report-March-22-2018.pdf) shows that nearly half the city’s schools lack access to external food and nutrition education programs. To find a program that’s right for your school’s budget and needs, please visit the [Tisch Center Online Resource](https://www.tc.columbia.edu/tisch/nepnyc/). [Fan4Kids](https://www.fan4kids.org/), [WITS](http://www.wellnessintheschools.org/), [Spoons Across America](http://spoonsacrossamerica.org/), [Brighter Bites](https://www.brighterbites.org/) and more.

**What are the cold menu options offered daily?**

The classic menu offers PB&J, a deli sandwich, a cheese sandwich and a complete salad grab-n-go meal. The alternative menu offers PB&J, cheese sandwich, and hummus grab-n-go. The vegetarian menu offers the same cold options as the alternative but also adds a yogurt grab-n-go.

**How is my kitchen staffed?**

Each kitchen has a head cook, as well as line servers, and a school food manager who oversees three schools in the neighborhood. The [district school food manager](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/resources/SchoolFoodDistrictRegionalDirectory.pdf) oversees all schools in your district. There is then a regional director reporting to main OFNS executive level leadership.

**What if my cafeteria staff doesn’t offer all these cold items each day, or I have an issue with something going on in the cafeteria?**

Things happen and school food needs to be made aware! First discuss your issue with your school food manager. Find a time that works for them and be polite and respectful. A bull in the china shop approach won’t work to build a good relationship over time and you need that good relationship. If you don’t know your school food manager, ask your principal to introduce you. If you have trouble figuring out who that is, contact your district school food supervisor. [Find yours here](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/resources/SchoolFoodDistrictRegionalDirectory.pdf).

**What is offer versus serve?**

To cut down on waste, DOE uses offer versus serve. This means that staff should not serve all components of a dish, instead, students can choose three items, one of which must be a fruit or vegetable for it to be counted as a reimbursable meal (the federal government reimburses the city for all qualifying meals at a rate of $3.40, about $1.40 of that is on food costs, the rest is on labor cost, paper goods, benefits, etc.)

**Tell me about the NYC Nutrition Standards.**

[NYC Nutrition standards](https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/nyc-food-standards.page) exceed USDA standards on sodium, sugar and fat allowances. USDA is a pretty low bar but it’s great to see this. None of the food served is fried, and there are more whole grains used. Learn more [here](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/eatatschool/nutritionstandards.htm#nutritionstandards).

**I am concerned about certain ingredients in my child’s food. Does NYC have a list of all ingredients in the meals served?**

Not at the moment. This level of transparency has been requested. For now, there is just [this list of nutritional info on all foods served.](https://www.opt-osfns.org/schoolfoodny/resources/MenuNutritionInformation.pdf)

**Is there a list of prohibited ingredients?**

Yes, NYC has a [list of prohibited ingredients](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/resources/prohibited.pdf) that includes MSG and high fructose corn syrup, among others.

**What about hormones and antibiotics in the meat proteins?**

DOE is going to be reintroducing antibiotic-free (ABF) chicken in 2019, but it has not procured an ABF meat at the moment.

**I want to cut down on waste, can I start a leftovers table?**

Yes. A leftovers table can be requested by your school food manager. It will be labeled in the cafeteria and kids can take from that table to supplement their lunch. It includes any unopened foods not subject to spoilage. Milks can be put there too as long as they are kept in an ice tray. NYC is looking to other cities who are giving uneaten food away to food pantries and more in an effort to reduce waste and serve the needy and hungry.

**My school has chocolate milk, but it’s full of sugar. Can I get it off the menu?**

We are advocating for OFNS to stop serving sweetened milk (aka chocolate milk) but at this time, it is a school by school process. The request must come from your principal, who can ask your school food manager to stop serving chocolate milk. The NYC Department of Health (DOH) actually opposes serving chocolate milk because of its high sugar content (20 grams per 8 ounces) and the high rate of obesity in children. The DOH has an online toolkit with [flyers](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/dpho/chocolate-milk-guide.pdf) and [a letter to your principal.](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/dpho/choc-milk-letter-to-school.pdf) Some schools choose to remove all chocolate milk and others keep it as a special treat on Fridays. Do what’s right for your community.

**Are there lactose-free milk options?**

Currently there are no milk alternatives offered by DOE. Milk choices are low-fat milk or low-fat sweetened milk. However, if your child has a lactose allergy or intolerance, you can bring a doctor’s note and give it to the nurse and your school food manager can order lactose-free milk for your child.

**I’d like a water jet at my school. Can I get one? How much is it?**

Great idea. [Water jets, which keep water cold and fresh, have been shown](https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/water-jets-schools-simple-solution-helping-combat-childhood-obesity/) to increase water consumption and decrease obesity and every school is entitled to one, you just have to ask. We are advocating to have this don’t automatically by the DOE but in the meantime, just ask your school food manager. It doesn't cost anything. It keeps the water fresh and cold and comes with recyclable cups.

**I don’t have a salad bar at my school, can I get one?**

Yes! As long as your school has a kitchen, and an electric outlet you can and should have a salad bar. If you don’t, please ask your school food manager. Your principal should be able to introduce you. Or you can find your school food manager, contact your district manager, find their name and contact information [here](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/resources/SchoolFoodDistrictRegionalDirectory.pdf).

**My school doesn’t let little kids use the salad bar without a grown up. Is that allowed?**

Yes. It’s up to the school food manager and staff to decide if they see kids just grabbing with hands. Parents should be brought in to volunteer to help those kids access the salad bar.

**Can I use foods grown in my school garden?**

Yes, as long as there is a current soil test. Please contact [George Edwards](http://www.schoolfoodnyc.org/OurPrograms/GTC.htm) with questions.

For other questions regarding school food please contact Andrea Strong at [nychsfa@gmail.com](mailto:nychsfa@gmail.com) or Stephen O’Brien, Director of Special Projects at 718-707-4367 or email him at [sobrien@schools.nyc.gov](mailto:sobrien@schools.nyc.gov).