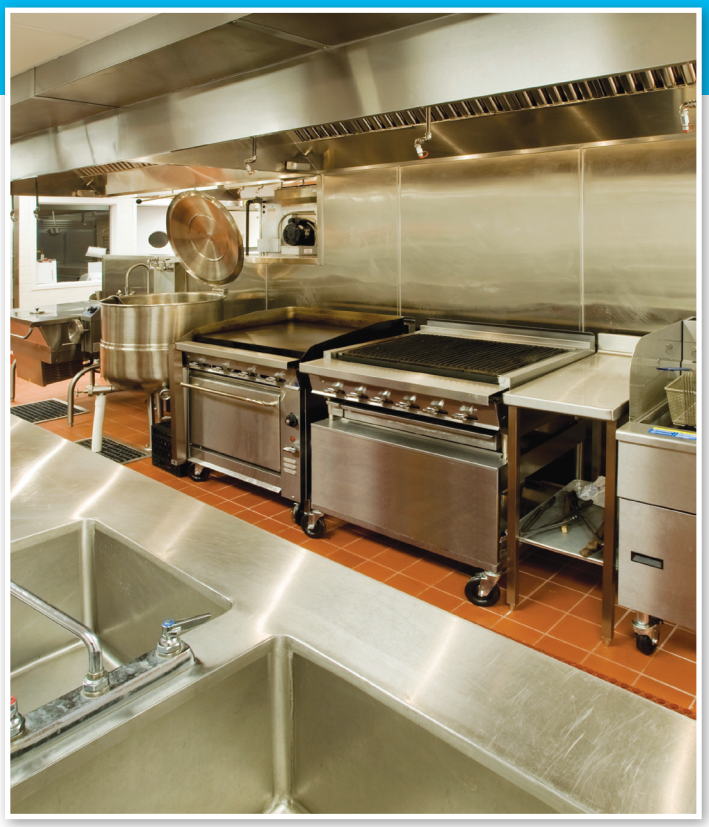
Tools for Helping School Meals Make the Grade



Imagine having only a deep-fat fryer or a microwave in your kitchen for preparing meals. This is the reality for the countless schools that feed tens of millions of children each day. The foods served by schools are an important source of the nutrients needed by kids to grow, learn and succeed, yet many schools are unable to provide safe and balanced menus because of broken, outdated or absent kitchen equipment.

*A recent survey of school food service professionals revealed that **nearly half** still use deep-fat fryers in food preparation.*[1]

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which administers school meal programs, is updating its nutrition standards to reflect the expert recommendations that children should eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains. To meet these standards, schools need sufficient funds to purchase food, replace outdated equipment and train cafeteria staff on the proper preparation of safe, healthy meals.

COST

School meal programs operate on extremely tight budgets, with roughly $1.25 allocated for food per lunch.[2] When every penny counts, the cost of offering menus with more fruits, vegetables and whole grains can be prohibitive. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 represents a step in the right direction by providing a funding increase—six cents per meal—to assist schools in offering healthier meals. However, paying for the food isn't enough. Schools must also have the equipment and trained staff needed to prepare the meals.

Equipment Spotlight: Mississippi[3]

Mississippi schools engaged in a statewide obesity prevention campaign and received $1.7 million in federal funds to purchase kitchen equipment. Replacing deep-fat fryers with combination oven-steamers enabled schools to serve baked chicken tenders and whole-grain rolls instead of fried chicken and high-fat tater tots. Such changes have resulted in a significant reduction in the calories and saturated fat in school meals, and the healthier baked products received an overwhelmingly positive response from students and staff.

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EQUIPMENT

Unfortunately, many school kitchens were built decades ago and designed with the minimal capacity required to reheat and hold food. From the beginning of the National School Lunch Program in 1946 to the early 1980s, the government has periodically made substantial short-term investments available to schools for kitchen equipment.[4] After a 25-year gap without such financial support, in 2009, Congress and USDA funded $125 million for school kitchen equipment.[5,6] Applications totaling $600 million poured in—a stark demonstration of the unmet need in schools that are eager to replace their antiquated equipment with steamers, ovens and salad bars. Research has found that government grants for kitchen upgrades and training can significantly improve the nutritional quality of school meals.[7]

TRAINING

Currently, many school cafeteria workers are trained only in the use of existing school kitchen tools, such as fryers and microwaves. Staff must be taught how to properly use the industrial kitchen equipment needed to bake, grill and roast healthier meals. In fact, according to a recent survey of school nutrition directors, their greatest challenge in preparing healthy meals was recruiting workers with the necessary skill level.[8]

Food safety must be a priority when feeding millions of children each day. Over the past four decades, foodborne illness outbreaks in schools have sickened tens of thousands of students and school staff.[9] This fact underscores the need for cafeteria staff to be trained in the procedures of safely handling foods.

As a key federal program, USDA's Team Nutrition initiative funds the training of food service workers. In 2010, Team Nutrition invested $5.4 million in grants for states to work with their schools on activities such as developing safe, healthier meals. States like Iowa (see box) leveraged these funds to train workers on meal planning, food preparation and food safety.

Team Nutrition Spotlight: Iowa[10]

Iowa used a 2010 Team Nutrition training grant to teach food service workers how to comply with the most recent *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* when planning and preparing meals. The state also held workshops educating 50 food service directors on the standards set by USDA's *HealthierUS School Challenge*—a national, voluntary initiative started in 2004 that encourages schools to implement healthier nutrition and physical activity requirements.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

Planning and preparing safe and healthy school meals that include the recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables and whole grains requires proper training and updated kitchen equipment. While the recent federal investment in school food service equipment, coupled with donations and private-sector efforts, have helped fill the gap, a more sustained effort that includes resources for training food service personnel is necessary to promote effective and long-term change.

*The **Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project** provides nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations on polices that impact the safety and healthfulness of school foods. Learn more at www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org.*

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[1] School Nutrition Association, *trendSets Newsletter, Volume 3*, 2007.

[2] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis. *School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study-II, Final Report*, 2008, www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/MealCostStudy.pdf (accessed October 26, 2010).

[3] National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, *Mississippi POWER (Preventing Obesity with Every Resource): Case Study*, nga.org/Files/pdf/1003HEALTHYKIDSCASESTUDYMS.PDF (accessed November 4, 2010).

[4] Gordon W. Gunderson, "The National School Lunch Program Background and Development," U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/AboutLunch/ProgramHistory_5.htm#29 (accessed December 1, 2010).

[5] U.S. Department of Agriculture, "2009 Equipment Assistance Grants for School Food Authorities," Policy Memo SP 18-2009, March 9, 2009, www.fns.usda.gov/fns/recovery/memos/SP_18-2009_sa.pdf (accessed November 4, 2010).

[6] U.S. Department of Agriculture, "FY2010 National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Equipment Assistance Grants for School Food Authorities," Policy Memo SP 14-2010, January 14, 2010, www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/governance/Policy-Memos/2010/SP_14-2010_os.pdf (accessed November 4, 2010).

[7] Barbara Wagner, Benjamin Senauer and C. Ford Runge, "An Empirical Analysis of and Policy Recommendations to Improve the Nutritional Quality of School Meals," *Review of Agricultural Economics* 29, no. 4 (2007): 672-688.

[8] School Nutrition Association, *trendSets Newsletter, Volume 3*, 2007.

[9] Nicholas A. Daniels et al., "Foodborne Disease Outbreaks in United States Schools," *Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal 21*, no. 7 (2002): 623-628.

[10] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, "2010 Team Nutrition Training Grants," www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Grants/tnt10.html#Iowa (accessed November 4, 2010).