

Section IV. Policy Actions for Scaling Up Healthy, Climate-friendly School Food

Policy is a vital driver of systemic change that cannot be overlooked. Despite the growth of climate-friendly school food, there are significant policy and structural barriers that inhibit schools from offering a wider array of healthy, plant-forward foods on a daily basis. In many cases, misguided incentives and taxpayer dollars promote unhealthy and unsustainable food, particularly highly processed foods and industrial meat and dairy. Building on farm to school policy and the landmark 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (which required fruits, vegetables and whole grains to be served with every meal), below we identify policy actions at the district, state and federal levels that will help ensure greater access to healthy, climate-friendly food. Many of these are based on input from foodservice directors, state officials, non-profit organizations and educators.

We hope these recommendations will inspire collective discussion and action by students, parents, NGO advocates, foodservice directors, staff, teachers, school boards and policy makers. These stakeholders all have a role to play in promoting policy solutions that can help flip institutional incentives from an emphasis on highly processed, industrial animal products to healthy, fresh, climate-friendly, plant-forward meals.

“I think what is missing is the advocacy work, and the need to shift to plant-based proteins using legislation.”

—Stephen O’Brien, New York City Office of SchoolFood

A. School District-level Policy

School boards can lead the shift to healthy, climate-friendly foodservice.

- **Require a healthy, plant-based food option at every meal.**
- **Adopt the Good Food Purchasing Policy** to promote a systemic shift toward healthy, local, humane, equitable and climate-friendly foods.
- **Adopt Meatless Mondays or Lean and Green days** that feature plant-based food as the primary entrée.
- **Elect to make your district an Offer Versus Serve site**, in order to make milk optional.
- **Reduce and eventually remove processed meats** (e.g. chicken nuggets, hot dogs, bacon, pepperoni, lunch meat) from school menus and disallow purchasing contracts with fast food companies for these unhealthy foods.
- **Ensure that nutrition services job descriptions require directors to serve climate-friendly food.**
- **Adopt a climate action resolution** that commits a school district to pursue climate-friendly foodservice and **set a district-wide goal** for reducing the carbon footprint of school food.
- **Incorporate healthy, climate-friendly food goals into the school wellness policy.**
- **Pass local bond measures** that increase funding for kitchen facilities (Oakland, California [Measure J](#)).

B. State policy

By investing in nutrition education and wellness policies and encouraging schools to purchase locally sourced, climate-friendly foods, states can promote solutions that are a win win for local farmers, public health and the climate.

- **Enact healthy, climate-friendly food legislation and/or resolutions** (e.g. [California](#), [New York](#) and [Hawaii](#)) requiring or encouraging schools to serve daily vegetarian and/or plant-based and nondairy beverages to students.
- **Enact farm to school purchasing legislation and policies** that provide financial incentives for purchasing more locally sourced plant-based products.ⁱ
- **Reform state procurement bids to include more plant-based whole foods items** (e.g., beans, lentils, edamame) and non-GMO meat replacement products. This would greatly improve access and affordability.

ⁱ In Oregon, the 2017 House Bill 2038 provided \$4.5 million over 2 years for the statewide Farm to School and School Garden grant program. In New York, the recently adopted No Student Goes Hungry legislation increased the reimbursement for school lunches from 5.9 cents to 25 cents per meal for any district that purchases at least 30 percent of its ingredients from New York farms.

- **Provide web-based educational resources** (e.g. recipes, on-line trainings, sample policies) modeled on the CA Department of Education’s [Vegetarian Meal Options in Child Nutrition Programs](#) website.
- **Allocate funds and develop new resources for plant-based nutrition, wellness and environmental curriculum**, including the creation of School Wellness Policy Toolkits with information on climate-friendly options.
- **Increase funding for school food kitchen improvements** (including equipment and built infrastructure).

C. National Policy

1. The USDA’s National School Lunch Program can make important changes to Child Nutrition Programs without going through Congress:

- **Rename the Meat/Meat Alternate Category “Protein Category”** and make the nutritional content description more accurate by including plant-based sources of proteins in the description.
- **Update the nutritional requirements for protein equivalence of plant based proteins** so they better represent nutrition science. Currently, larger quantities of plant-based sources of proteins are required in recipes than is necessary given their actual protein content.
- **Add new plant-based sources of proteins (e.g. quinoa, tempeh and seitan) to the NSLP USDA Foods Product Information Sheets for Meat/Meat Alternates** and allow for crediting a protein food regardless of how it is presented (e.g. a mashed bean burger) by eliminating the regulation that states “if the dish does not contain at least 1/8 cup of a recognizable component then the blended foods do not contribute to the meal requirements.”⁶⁵
- **Reform USDA foods**⁶⁷ by:
 - » Spending a larger portion of its budget on plant-based foods (e.g. fresh, frozen, dried, and canned produce, whole-grain pastas, legumes and meat alternatives (e.g. veggie burgers; bean burritos); and
 - » Adding diverse products like tofu, seitan, and soy yogurt to its food offerings
- **Make all schools Offer Versus Serve for milk as a default;** remove the non-dairy milk note requirement and make non-dairy milks fully reimbursable.
- **Update the USDA’s technical resource for wellness policies** by:
 - » **Ensuring that the Core Nutrition Message better reflect the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans** that students —teenage boys, in particular— consume less meat and that plant-based sources of proteins are key ingredients to a healthy diet.
 - » **Amending the USDA Wellness Policy Toolkit** to include information on climate-friendly options.
 - » **Providing professional development and technical resources** similar to those provided by the CA Department of Education on its web page: [“Vegetarian Meal Options in Child Nutrition Programs”](#)
- **Reform child nutrition (CN) labeling requirements** to make it easier for plant-based food manufacturers to meet the required CN standardized nutrition product labels.

2. Congress should amend the National School Lunch Act to:

- » Allow for higher reimbursements for all meals; and especially for meals with fresh fruits and vegetables;
- » Make dairy an optional rather than mandatory meal component;
- » Increase grant funding to farm to school programs and kitchen improvements (including equipment and built infrastructure) and simplify the grant reporting processes; and
- » Allow school food professionals to use one percent of the nonprofit school foodservice account funds for school or district nutrition education projects.