

January Broadcast 2014: *Healthy School Lunches: An Integral Part of the School Day*

**Moderator:** Hello, and welcome to Public Health Live, the third Thursday breakfast broadcast. I'm Rachel Breidster and I'll be your moderator today. Before we get started, I'd like to ask that you fill out the online evaluation at the end of the webcast. Continuing education credits are available after you complete our short posttest and your feedback is helpful in planning future programs. We encourage you to let us know what topics are of interest to you and how we can best meet your needs. As for today's program, we will be taking your questions throughout the hour by phone. The toll free number is 1-800-452-0662 or you can e-mail us questions any time at [phlive.ny@gmail.com](mailto:phlive.ny@gmail.com). Please feel free to send in your questions at any time throughout the hour. Today's program is *Healthy School Lunches: An Integral Part of the School Day*. Our guests are Margo Wootan, from the Center for Science in the Public Interest and Jessica Pino, from Hunger Solutions New York. Thank you both so much for being here. We're excited to have this conversation today. So, Margo, we're going to be talking about school foods during this hour and I know that in recent years the landscape of what foods we have in schools has really been changing. Can you start off by talking about what are some bigger changes that we have seen?

**Margo Wootan:** There is so much happening on school foods. A lot of school districts have pulled together committees and developed local nutrition and wellness policies. States have passed policies especially around getting soda and unhealthy foods at vending and a la carte and school stores, the so-called "competitive foods." We worked with a lot of members of the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity, NANA, with congress and with the Obama administration to pass the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act in 2010. At the national state and local level, there's a lot of activity around school foods.

**Moderator:** So one of those things you mentioned was the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act. That seems to be one of the driving forces behind some of the changes that are taking place. Can you tell us a little bit more about the details of that act and what its intent is and what it's doing?

**Margo Wootan:** A lot of people know about the changes in school meal standards. That's what's happened so far and has been going into effect but, with the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act, we were able to put in place a very comprehensive system of changes to help support healthier school nutrition environments. So there are new school lunch and breakfast standards. There are also updated standards for the foods sold outside the meal so the competitive foods, vending, a la carte, school stores. There's more technical assistance in training. There are various mechanisms in trying to continue to improve the foods that USDA provides to schools for free through the commodities program. There's a number of different ways that schools are getting increased resources, bringing more money in to help fund the school lunch and breakfast program and there are some provisions to strengthen the local wellness policies to make sure that those are implemented better and also to get parents more engaged with them, to let them know that there are transparency provisions. Then one of the other important sets of changes in the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act, is to help ensure compliance with the new standards. It is not enough to have the standards on paper. We want to make sure they are implemented. There are changes in accountability and transparency.

**Moderator:** So it certainly sounds like a very comprehensive act. When we are talking about obesity, I mean I think in this day and age we all recognize that America has an obesity problem. But focusing

efforts in the schools, why are we doing that? Is there reason to believe that children are exposed or more likely to become obese through the foods they are eating in schools? Why are we targeting so many efforts there?

**Margo Wootan:** It's not that we're blaming schools for causing obesity, it's just that kids spend so much time at school. After home, school is the next place they spend most of their waking hours. Kids do a lot of eating at school. Some kids eat breakfast, virtually all kids eat lunch, younger kids eat a morning snack, some kids eat at after care, after school. So overall, kids are eating a third to a half of their calories at school on school days. One of the other nice things about focusing on school nutrition policies is, it's not adding to the burden of schools. It's not asking them to do more, which is hard because schools are being asked to do more and more with what seems like less and less. We are not asking schools to take on a new responsibility we're just saying, you're already feeding kids, instead of feeding them what you are feeding them now, try to make that food more healthful.

**Moderator:** Sure, and that certainly seems like it's a common sense approach. Now one of the bigger changes we've seen is in meal patterns pattern in breakfast and lunch. How has the meal changed in what we're expected to be providing?

**Margo Wootan:** So there are updated nutrition standards for school lunch and breakfast. Those are being phased in gradually over time. What we'll end up with are school lunches that have double the amounts of fruits and vegetables, which are great, because fruits and vegetables are something that kids are not eating enough of.

**Moderator:** Sure.

**Margo Wootan:** There will be less of the bad stuff, less salt, less trans fats. Schools have been working to reduce saturated fats, which will continue. The grains will need to be whole grain rich. They don't have to be 100% whole grain, but they need to be at least half whole grain. The milk needs to be low fat. And then, importantly, USDA adjusted the calorie level so they address both hunger and obesity. We want to make sure kids get enough to eat, but they are not overfed.

**Moderator:** Sure, which seems like a tricky balance to achieve.

**Margo Wootan:** There's been a little controversy about the calorie caps. You hear about kids going hungry. A lot of it has been political pushback because the calorie levels really are ample to provide for most kids nutrition needs. For a very active teenage boy, the calorie levels were never high enough for them anyway. They are going to need to buy an extra entree or side dish. You know, if a kids eating 400 calories a day, no school lunch is going to take care of those needs.

**Moderator:** Now I would imagine that one of the concerns in changing these patterns in changing these standards and these patterns is the cost. Is it reasonable to expect that schools can afford to implement these new changes?

**Margo Wootan:** We have heard some complaints about the cost. From some school administrators and some policymakers who say this is an unfunded mandate. We are asking school to make these changes

and we are not providing them with ample resources. This is far from an unfunded mandate. One thing that is different about school foods compared to other aspects of education policy and education programs is that the school lunch and breakfast programs are national programs. Most of the money comes from the federal government to the tune of somewhere around \$13 billion a year. And so, the nutrition standards are really just a condition of funding. If federal taxpayers are going to provide schools with billions and billions of dollars, we want to make sure that that money is well spent. It's just a matter of good government. There are nutrition standards to make sure this nutrition program actually provides nutrition food. It's not unfunded. It's largely funded by the federal government.

**Moderator:** Sure. Now getting back to the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act, what resources does that provide?

**Margo Wootan:** So there are a couple ways the Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act try to enhance funding. It's not all government money. Most people know about the six cent reimbursement. So if a school is meeting the new school lunch standards, then get an extra six cents per lunch. That's one direct source of funds. It's also an incentive that seems to be working very well to entice schools and encourage schools to make sure they are meeting the new lunch standards. Schools are doing great. About 80% or over 80% of school districts are already meeting or well on their way to meeting the standards and are getting that additional six cents. But it's not all up to government. Families also need to do their share. So middle and upper income families pay for their children's school lunch. Oftentimes schools were pricing those school lunches for middle and upper income families at a price that was lower than what it cost them to provide those meals. And so what would happen is money would be shifted from providing healthy foods for low income kids to lunches for upper income families. That meant less resources for fruits and vegetables and whole grains for low income kids. So there's provisions Healthy, Hunger-free Kids to make sure schools are pricing the paid meals, the meals for upper and middle income kids at a level that covers their costs, so that the money that's meant for low income kids goes there. The other pricing provision has to do with a la carte food. Kids, in addition to buying a full meal can buy pizza, hamburgers, chicken sandwiches, French fries, other things individually a la carte. Oftentimes, schools are pricing the a la carte foods at lower than what it costs to sell and serve the foods. Money was being drained away from providing healthy foods for low income kids. Those two pricing strategies, plus the six cents, all add up to significant additional resources to help pay for the healthy school meals. It's fair because then parents do their share, the government does their share and this cost is spread.

**Moderator:** And when we're looking over the course of a period of time, these initiatives and this push to make healthier implementation really doesn't end up as a deficit for the school, right? I mean it kind of pays for itself?

**Margo Wootan:** It shouldn't. Some schools are complaining they are not able to serve the healthy school meals within the current reimbursement rate. Most schools can do it. What that tells us is that we need to give technical assistance, training and other support to those schools that are struggling to serve healthy meals within budget so they can do it. There's actually a very bad provision in the Omnibus Appropriations Bill that came out this week from Congress, which is the big spending bill that's funding the whole program saying that if a school can't provide healthy school meals within budget,

they should be able to get a waiver. What we say is we want all kids to have healthy foods. If the school is struggling and can't provide healthy food within a budget, we need to help that school with budgeting, with procurement and other technical assistance and training to make sure they can serve healthy meals to all kids with the money they have.

**Moderator:** Certainly. That seems to make sense. Are there ways that the USDA is helping schools to serve healthier meals?

**Margo Wootan:** In addition to the financial resources, there's more training and technical assistance and support. It's not an easy job to try to feed hundreds of kids in 20, 30 minutes. They all have different tastes and different cultural backgrounds. To feed meals they will like and eat is a tough job. So we want to make sure that we support schools in doing that. USDA has great resources. Also, the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act requires that schools be assessed more regularly to make sure they are complying with the new school meal standard. So it used to be that they were assessed only every five years, that's a long time. Now it's down to every three years, which should help. Overall, there's this, you know, comprehensive set of new standards, new resources, more TA, technical assistance, model product specifications on how to use your commodity foods better. A very comprehensive set of provisions to help every school district serve healthy food to all their kids.

**Moderator:** The picture you painted, there's a lot of resources in place, there's a lot happening. What more needs to be done? What are some of the challenges?

**Margo Wootan:** Well, schools have a tough job. For advocates and health professionals who want to get involved, schools could really use their support. One thing is that if you're a state level advocate or professional would be to work with your state child nutrition program. The child nutrition program is responsible for running school lunch and breakfast programs and other child nutrition programs. Talk with them, work with them, find out what they need. I'm actually going over to meet with the New York state child nutrition program today to see how it's going, what do they need, are they getting the training and support they need? That can really make a big difference. At the school level, schools have found it very helpful to engage children. These days, kids have a lot of opinions on what they want to eat from a very young age. We want to ask kids, you know, which entrees and side dishes, which fruits and vegetables do you like? Do some taste testing, have them vote. Get them engaged in marketing the school lunch program to their friends so that school lunch becomes cool. We want to make sure that the meals are appealing to kids and they are willing to eat it. We don't want it to be a program where, you know, the kids think 'oh, that's healthy food that tastes bad that I don't want to eat.' We have to engage kids to make school lunch cool. Kids are used to seeing billions of dollars worth of marketing from McDonalds, Burger King and Taco Bell. We want to make sure that they think school lunch is appealing and tastes great. Getting parents engaged is also really important. A lot of parents don't realize how the school lunch program has changed. And so they think about school lunches as being something that's unappealing or unhealthy, they might not know that their kids school lunch is really great, that it tastes good and is appealing. That way, the parents will be more willing to have their kids buy more school lunch. The more kids that participate in the program, the better it is for the program. We have a lot of resources on our website at [school foods.org/backtoschool](http://schoolfoods.org/backtoschool). There are tips for parents,

letters you could send home to them, letters to send to service directors thanking them for hard work and other materials to help engage parents and kids, school administrators, teachers and others in supporting the school lunch program.

**Moderator:** Excellent and it's interesting you are talking about getting students opinions. Last year, we did a webcast in 2013 where we interviewed folks out in Binghamton. They had the "Rock On Café" and we talked to them about their process and they do a taste testing and it's been a tremendously successful program. And that was a Public Health Live that we have that on our website that we did about a year ago.

**Margo Wootan:** That sounds great.

**Moderator:** So it's certainly been successful for them. I would imagine other schools could really benefit from a program like that as well.

**Margo Wootan:** Kids expect to be a part of a process, they expect to have a say in the decisions about what they eat. A school that's not, you know, that has plate waste where the kids don't like the meal, it's not that kids won't eat school lunch, they need to learn from the schools that are doing a great job. We have a great Pinterest store with other members of the Alliance for Nutrition and Activity. If you don't believe that school lunch can taste good, look good and be healthy, go to this Pinterest board and search for the Center of Science in the Public Interest and look for the school meals Pinterest board. There are beautiful meals, which I would love to eat for lunch every day.

**Moderator:** Excellent. We have been talking a lot about meals. One of the other issues are the competitive foods or other foods that make their way into the school setting. Can you talk about those?

**Margo Wootan:** There are a lot of foods sold outside the meal program. There's vending, these a la carte foods where kids buy food individually outside of a packaged meal in the cafeteria. School stores, lots and lots of fund-raisers that sell foods regularly. So one of the key provisions which we worked on for over a decade with Senator Harkin and others will require the USDA to update the nutrition standards for all the foods that are sold outside school meal program on the school campus during the school day. It doesn't cover a football game on a Friday night or a fund-raiser the kids might bring home and sell to their neighbors but it affects all the food sold on campus during the school day. So USDA updated those standards, they came out this summer, and they go into effect in the coming school year. So, the foods that are sold outside of meals have to meet standards for fat, salt, sugar, calories and really importantly, the food will also have to be food. You know, it won't only have to be low in the bad stuff, but needs to be a fruit, a vegetable, a whole grain; it'll have to provide something nutrition to kids. So, this would be a shift for some schools that don't have standards. For a lot of schools, they have been working on this. On the beverage side, in elementary and middle schools, schools will only be able to sell, water, juice and low fat milk. In high schools, they'll also be able to sell low calorie beverages. So about 60 calories per 12 ounce container. For the states that already have policies, which there are probably about a dozen with comprehensive policies, they are going to need to reconcile their current policy with the national policy. Sometimes that will mean just little tweaks, maybe they didn't have a sodium standard and now they have to have one. In other cases, it takes more work. The thing that

public health advocates can do is work with their state's child nutrition program to help schools get ready for the new standards and to help reconcile their existing competitive food standards with the new national standard.

**Moderator:** So one of the things you mentioned were the fund-raisers, you know, you are not necessarily talking about fund-raisers where kids take things and are selling them at home. I remember at school, a big part of fund raising is bake sales or a box of candy you bring home and you're selling chocolate bars to everyone. What are your thoughts, or what are the policies on fund raising?

**Margo Wootan:** The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act does cover fund-raisers. Those fund-raisers that are on campus during the school day. So if you are selling cookie dough at home to your neighbors on the weekends, that's not covered. A local wellness policy or a state policy would cover that. But USDA is allowing for some exemptions. The number of exemptions will be determined by every state. It's another thing at the state level. States will need to decide how many exemptions are they going to allow to the nutrition standards for fund-raisers? They can do one a semester, two a year, it is really up to them. The fundraising provision has been a little more controversial than the rest of the competitive food standards. I think we have gotten to a point where everybody thinks soda and candy bars should come out of vending machines. But fund-raisers, people have a little bit of nostalgia, or they think they're so essential. Like our education system will falter if we don't have a bake sale to raise funds. But there are lots of healthy fund-raisers. A lot of the unhealthy fund-raisers are not as great a fund-raiser as you might think. You are used to doing a bake sale. It's what you are always done. But I have to say as both a nutritionist and a mom, I can't stand bake sales. As a nutritionist, I don't like the high calorie fat, trans fat, saturated fat and sugar content. Sweet baked goods are a problem in American's diets and children's diets in particular. So nutritionally, bake sales are not good for kids. Financially and practically, they don't make any sense. As a mom, I have to buy a mix of brownies or go buy cupcakes, make them, send them to school with money with my daughter so she can buy them back. There are definitely more effective and certainly healthier ways to raise funds for schools.

**Moderator:** What are some of the ideas? What are some of the things you recommend as an alternative that might be more practical and also healthier?

**Margo Wootan:** There are tons of healthy options. A lot of times, it's just a matter of trying them out. We have looked at dozens of fund-raisers and pulled together a list of companies that have healthy fund raising options in a report called *Sweet Deals*, which people can find on our website. We have information in the back of over 60 companies that sell healthy foods, or even better, nonfood options. There are things like bottled water sales where schools can get a local business to sponsor the water bottle and put their corporate or school logo on it. Schools are selling calendars, reading cards, Christmas trees, candles, jewelry, clothing, personal care products. There are book fairs, grocery and other retail stores have gift card programs where a school keeps a cut of what people pay for the gift card. One of the great fund raising options that schools have made a lot of money on and that's good for kids are physical activity fund-raisers. Bowl-a-thons, walk-a-thons, 10k, 5k runs, they are great for kids and families and get them physically active and also raise a lot of money. These changes in fund raising, you know, some people might, 'oh, not that big a deal. An occasional fund-raiser, it's just, you

know, it's not that big a contributor to obesity and poor diets.' But many families don't realize, parents don't realize how many fund-raisers there are in schools that it could be almost every day that one club is selling Krispy Kreme doughnuts on the way in at breakfast time or selling pizza at lunchtime, selling candy bars and other things regularly during the school day. The other thing is the message it sends to kids. Kids aren't getting enough nutrition education to begin with. Then we undermine that nutrition education by telling them that, well, if you need money, it's okay to sell unhealthy food. That enlisting children in to sell unhealthy products to their friends or family or to sell them in schools sends the message to kids that good nutrition isn't important.

**Moderator:** Sure. Sure. In addition to the policies on nutrition, many school districts have policies on physical activity and wellness. Does the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act affect those policies?

**Margo Wootan:** Since 2004, there's been a provision in place to have schools develop and implement nutrition and physical activity wellness policies. Those policies are great for a number of reasons. They are good for implementing policies that are already in place at the national and state level. So if the state has PE standards, the local wellness policy can be a good way to implement the standards. They are also good for developing local policies around things that aren't addressed at the national and state level. Things like recess or food marketing in schools or rewards and parties that local policy might be the only policy. It might be the best way to address some of those issues. So, in the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act, there are provisions to strengthen the local wellness policies, especially around implementation. We find a lot of schools have pretty good wellness policies on the books. They are not always implemented, especially at the school building level. There might be a district policy on a website or in a drawer somewhere but actually making sure that that policy gets implemented at each school is really important. So making sure there's a teacher or committee or the PTA that's implementing that policy in each school is really important, making sure the school has an implementation plan, that the wellness policy is communicated to school administrators, teachers and parents. One of the provisions Healthy, Hunger Free Kids is a transparency provision to make sure that the local wellness policy is communicated to parents so that they know what they should be expecting from their school around nutritional and physical activity.

**Moderator:** That's fantastic. Now another concern is the marketing. So even if we are trying to encourage students to be eating healthy, we are designing healthier school lunches, trying to get students more physically active and bringing the policies to life, what about all the marketing kids are exposed to in vending machines and things of that nature?

**Margo Wootan:** Kids are exposed to a lot of food marketing, about \$2 billion worth a year. There's a lot of marketing and unfortunately, most of it is for unhealthy foods. Studies show it clearly affects children food preferences, their food choices, their diet and health. The marketing in schools is especially a problem. It should be a place that is cultivating and teaching kids, you know, cultivating good eating habits, teaching kids about nutrition education, and instead, it's giving kids the message nutrition isn't important and that can undermine their diets for the long term. There's marketing through a lot of venues of fund-raisers that we've already talked about. Also educational materials and curricula, posters and signs. The vending machines are not only dispensing unhealthy food, but they are

billboards for Coke and Gatorade. There are labeled redemption programs like Campbell's Labels for Education and incentive programs like The Pizza Hut Book Program. All of these things are marketing. The goal for the companies are to cultivate brand loyalty and cultivate children's food preferences so they prefer these foods over other foods. Food marketing can be addressed at the local level through local wellness policies, through a school board policy or at the state level through legislation and regulation or through the state board of education. Change Lab Solutions has a great model policy. We have a lot of fact sheets, backgrounder's tip sheets, and a lot of ideas on how to switch, how to remove the unhealthy food marketing from schools.

**Moderator:** Excellent. I'm sure that's very helpful. One of the other things to take into consideration is some of the ways we use food in the schools and probably at home as well. Using food as a reward. Can you talk about concerns you have about using food as a reward?

**Margo Wootan:** You know, some people will say 'a little piece of candy once in a while or a pizza party, isn't that fun, don't kids deserve that? It's a part of childhood.' Using food as a reward cultivates a bad relationship for children with food over the long term. There's a reason why, you know, many of us want ice cream when we are happy, when we are sad, when we are celebrating. We don't want to create these bad connections between food and mood with children early on. Food rewards can do that. There are lots of other ways to treat children and to reward them for good behavior or for doing a good job academically. We have a lot of tips on our website at [cspinet.org](http://cspinet.org) or [schoolfoods.org](http://schoolfoods.org) on how to reward children and a lot of times kids like praise and other kinds of rewards even better. They can be more effective and they are certainly better for children's health.

**Moderator:** I can remember, even when it was in school, when the list would come out who made the honor roll and the high honor roll, everyone went out for ice cream afterwards. It's what we did to celebrate and it does sort of become this thing that when you accomplish something, you go out to eat and celebrate with food. It's interesting how it starts at a young age and translates later in life.

**Margo Wootan:** Yeah, I mean praise, social rewards, recognition, you know getting the sash for having the highest math grade or getting a button that says you have done great, getting stamps on the back of their hands, getting little other kinds of trinkets. You know, oftentimes candy is not that special for kids anymore because they are, you know, giving out jolly ranchers left and right.

**Moderator:** Sure. Sure. What about parties in schools? We have the Halloween parties, the birthday parties. There's always a party celebrating something. What are your thoughts on that?

**Margo Wootan:** You know, I don't want to be accused of being the cupcake police. I do believe in having a birthday cake. My daughter always had a birthday cake for her birthday growing up. But the parties have just gotten out of hand. There are so many celebrations at schools, especially this is a problem in elementary school where you have 20-25 students and then every single holiday you can think of, you know, Halloween, Valentine's Day, you expect. It's Dr. Seuss' birthday, it's the 100th Day of School, its VIP day and you know everyone is an excuse for cupcakes. A birthday ends up meaning a party at school, a party at after care, a party with friends, a party with family. One cupcake or one piece of cake would be fine and would be a very nice celebration. But four cakes, you know, gets to be a lot of



work for parents and also starts to undermine children's health. And then each party ends up getting a bit out of hand. At schools these days, a lot of times it's not just cupcakes, it's also a sugary juice drink, pizza, Cheetos, and a little candy goodie bag that goes home. We recommend that schools find alternative ways of celebrating children's birthdays. It depends on the kid's age and what they like. Kids love extra recess or they can have a birthday sash or crown or pin. My daughter loved to be the line leader. They can eat lunch with the teacher for the day. We need to find other ways to reward and treat children. That, you know, it may seem like a party once in a while is not that big of a deal. It gets at the heart of how we use food with children. And how often we do. We need to make treats, treats again. You know, rather than have treats all the time, oftentimes it's a pastry at breakfast, a cookie at dinner; all these treats, all these rewards. We need to make treats special again. Have them occasionally so that when we do, we really enjoy them. Teaching children that from a young age is really important.

**Moderator:** As our listeners are taking all of this in and looking to make the changes you suggested, are there resources you would like to share to help folks implement some of these changes in their own lives?

**Margo Wootan:** Absolutely. For school wellness policies, the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity developed a model wellness policy and gathered a lot of resources together at this website, [www.SchoolWellnessPolicies.org](http://www.SchoolWellnessPolicies.org). We have a lot of other resources on our website at [cspinet.org](http://cspinet.org). There's a nutrition policy section and all the school food policies we talked about today, we have backgrounders, fact sheets, model policies and then also on a whole other range of policies on restaurant foods and healthy food on government property. We have resources we developed at the Center for Science in the Public Interest but also other resources that other coalition partners developed that we think are good resources. If someone else has done it, we don't necessarily do it again. We'll try to put it on our website. Also, we are available to provide some technical assistance and support to folks working on state and local school foods policies. I will also point you to social media. We have a Facebook page, which not only has a lot of good policy information but also practical tips. If you are interested in good recipes in how to eat better, follow us on Facebook and twitter. I mentioned our Pinterest board, which has great pictures of healthy, appealing school lunches, and also some great recipes. So, we are there through social media as well. Just, you know, go to Facebook, Twitter or Pinterest and search for the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

**Moderator:** Margo, thank you so much for everything you shared with us today. We are going to hear from Jessica about her work as a child nutrition program specialist. Before we do, let's hear first from our Commissioner of the New York State Department of Health on the importance of having this conversation and talking about nutrition here in our schools in New York State.

*[Video]*

**Moderator:** Doctor Shah, why is it so important that we be addressing nutrition in schools?

**Dr. Nirav Shah:** Schools have long been identified as the ideal setting for obesity prevention. Children spend more time in school than any other environment outside the home. In New York State,

overweight and obesity affect fully 40% of public school students in New York City between the ages of 6 and 12 and 32% of students in the rest of New York State. 31% of New York children ages 2 to 4 enrolled in the special supplemental programs for Women, Infants and Children, or W.I.C., are overweight or obese.

**Moderator:** Why would you say that a healthy nutrition environment in schools is important?

**Dr. Nirav Shah:** Children are establishing healthy habits that last a lifetime. School environments should make it easy for children to make the healthy choice so those behaviors become the default. They model what children learn about nutrition in health science and other classes. They play an important role in children's health by adopting and implementing policies and regulations that support healthful eating environments for students and staff. Creating healthy food environments is a team effort with coordination among school administration, students, staff, parents and members of the community.

**Moderator:** What would you say is the connection or is there a connection between nutrition and learning?

**Dr. Nirav Shah:** The strongest evidence is around breakfast. Eating breakfast regularly is associated with improved cognitive function, academic achievement, and school attendance. There's also strong evidence linking severe iron deficiency to poor academic performance. There's also evidence that consuming fewer sugary drinks, more milk, and more vitamins and minerals is linked to better academic performance.

**Moderator:** Don't you think that children should have the option to choose between healthful and unhealthful foods to help them prepare for choices in the future?

**Dr. Nirav Shah:** A study conducted prior to the changes made by The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 showed that about a third of calories children consume in school are empty calories, those from fat and added sugars. The top three sources of added fats and sugars were sugary drinks, grain desserts such as cookies, cupcakes, and high fat nuts, and pizza was also a big contributor. The same study show that about a third of calories consumed from fast food restaurants and stores were also empty. Schools should be a place that allows students to practice the healthy behaviors they learn in the classroom.

**Moderator:** So when it comes to nutrition, what interventions do you think can be made to improve health in public schools?

**Dr. Nirav Shah:** Our Prevention Agenda has a goal that by December 31st, 2017, we want to increase the number of school districts whose competitive food policies meet or exceed the Institute of Medicine's recommendations for healthy food. Interventions we consider include incorporating time into the school day so that students have adequate time to eat nutritious lunches and snacks, increasing the number of schools that establish strong nutritional standards for all foods and beverages sold and provided through schools such as establishing sugary drink policies, promoting access to free drinking water, and adopting Institute of Medicine nutrition standards for school foods sold and served outside the federal child nutrition program. Making healthier foods a high priority in our schools. To be

successful, it will require a truly collaborative effort with public health, school administrators, principals, school food service, teachers and parents.

**Moderator:** So, Jessica, you have been sitting here patiently the whole time. I appreciate you being here. Can you start by talking about your role at Hunger Solutions New York as a child nutrition program specialist.

**Jessica Pino:** Thanks so much for having me. So Hunger Solutions New York is a statewide antihunger organization. So in the context of school meals, we recognize that hungry kids are at a disadvantage to their peers in terms of physical, social and academic advantages. We are concerned with, we want to ensure where children learn and play and grow, and they are getting access to nutritious foods they need to be successful.

**Moderator:** What about the School Breakfast Program? That's one of the focuses you're going to talk about today. How is that program utilized? Are people as aware of it as they should be? Is it getting the usage that it's intended to have?

**Jessica Pino:** So the School Breakfast Program is one that we focus on because it's underutilized in New York State. So when we look at school lunch participation vs school breakfast participation, nearly 1.6 million children access lunch whereas breakfast, we are looking at about 596,000 students. You can see there's a significant disparity between the participation rate. We really, and also, we are concerned with low income participants, particularly.

**Moderator:** And to be clear, we are talking the number of students who access breakfast through the School Breakfast Program, correct?

**Jessica Pino:** Yes, we are talking about the nationally funded School Breakfast Program that Margot talked about earlier. In terms of overall enrollment, one in five students in New York State participate in the School Breakfast Program. When we look particularly at low income students, 1.6 million students qualify for free and reduced priced school meals. So that includes both lunch and breakfast. Only one in three of those students participate in the program. When we take a closer look at the low income participation, we see that of the students, for every 100 students that receive a free and reduced price lunch, only 44 receive the free and reduced priced breakfast. Technically, we would like to see 100% of those low income kids getting both meals to be fueled up and ready to learn. So, FRAC does a ranking of how are states doing in reaching the low income kids? New York State ranks 41st among all that states so this is definitely an area of concern.

**Moderator:** Saying 44 out of 100, there seems to be a lag there, a disparity we would like to encourage. Can you talk about that ranking that we're 41st in the nation? What does that mean and translate to?

**Jessica Pino:** Right, so our partners at Food Research and Action Center, or FRAC, are releasing a school breakfast score card and gave us a special preview of the results there. We are still at that 44% of reaching all low income kids. They break it out. They set goals for states. States who receive a 70 to 100 ratio, that means that an additional over 320 students would eat every day, these are low income

students, and bringing in an additional \$78.5 million in child nutrition funding for the School Breakfast Program. So, what we really like to talk about is every day a low income kid does not eat breakfast, federal and state potential funding is left on the table. So, in that same ranking New York State was identified as one of the top states to forfeit federal funding due to lack of participation.

**Moderator:** So financially, we could really benefit by increasing those numbers. You have been talking, so far, about the underutilization about the School Breakfast Program. Would you say that regardless of income and regardless of whether it's the School Breakfast Program, are children missing out? Are we achieving a desirable rate of children who are actually eating breakfast?

**Jessica Pino:** That's a great point. It's not just for low income kids. Regardless of income level, national surveys show one in five kids and one in three teens, regardless of income, are missing out on school breakfast, for various reasons. This statistic is really important. It underscores the importance of the School Breakfast Program and the opportunity schools have to make sure kids are getting a nutritious start to the day with a balanced breakfast. We are strongly encouraging schools to focus on their participation in School Breakfast Programs and set goals to increase the number of kids accessing breakfast. A review of over 50 studies that appeared in the Journal of School Health in September of 2011 points to a growing research that skipping breakfast hurts children in their overall cognitive performance, it really affects their alertness levels, attention, memory, problem solving, mathematical skills. So schools have a unique opportunity with the School Breakfast Program to strategically support student achievement by making sure they are accessing this meal.

**Moderator:** It certainly seems like there's research to support the idea that hey we want children eating breakfast because they are going to do better in a number of different ways. How do you identify what the barriers are as to why students are not eating breakfast?

**Jessica Pino:** Right, so, the USDA has done studies and evaluations of programs and recognized that there are barriers that are part of life: early morning schedules, the rush in the morning. I eat my breakfast in the car ride to the commute. These studies show there are barriers in schools that can be addressed like tight morning bus schedules. There's really not enough time where kids have time to get off the bus and actually get that meal service. Pressure to get to class on time are real things that kids face every morning. Also the stigma that school breakfast is only for low income kids. That's always constantly trying to break down the barrier, that it is a program for all children. Schools are recognizing these barriers and understanding there are things they can do within their particular building to make it easier for schools to access these programs.

**Moderator:** What are some of the things schools are doing? Certainly, you mentioned, the pressure to get to class on time. Obviously, we want them to get to class on time. We can't necessarily eliminate that. What are the ways to work around it? What are schools doing?

**Jessica Pino:** What we find has been key is making breakfast accessible, making an opportunity to have breakfast. So a key part of this is moving breakfast out of the traditional approach of serving in the cafeteria ten to 15 minutes before school. Schools see that they have to have at least five lunch periods to serve the student population lunch whereas there's a ten to 15 minute window for it to happen. So

moving that, the breakfast out of the cafeteria has been a proven tactic to increase participation and really, so schools are implementing some really tried, true and effective ways to implement breakfast outside of the cafeteria.

**Moderator:** And making it kind of part of the school day, is that the new approach?

**Jessica Pino:** Yes. So, really integrating like lunch, making breakfast part of the school day is a key to success, part of the models the schools are implementing. Many of these models are considered breakfast after the bell. Really embracing that idea that it is part of the school day. Each model has been adopted to meet the specific and unique needs of each building and each classroom. They generally fall into three categories. Breakfast in the classroom, meals are given directly to kids in that first 10-15 minutes in the classroom. Elementary school kids, when they are getting ready for the day and morning announcements are happening, they are eating at that same time. Teachers find it's a much easier transition than trying to get out of the cafeteria. It really calms the morning for kids. Classroom breakfast has been successful. They recommend it as one of the most promising approaches for expanding school breakfast in the country. Other options are grab and go. This is where a kiosk is set up in a hallway or lobby where kids can pick up a bagged breakfast and they can eat on their way to class or in the home room. Another option is breakfast after first period. Opening your cafeteria for breakfast after that initial time is really ideal for high school students to incorporate a morning meal into their routine.

**Moderator:** You mentioned the alternative ways of serving breakfast, you called them tried, true, and effective. Can you elaborate what you mean by that?

**Jessica Pino:** Share Our Strength is a national anti-hunger group that looks at breakfast after the bell and has done evaluations of the program has found that not only have these programs increased participation, but also have seen larger impacts improving student alertness, less visits to the school nurse, less discipline problems and positive impacts on attendance. This recent weekend we saw a local school, Schenectady City School District talk about how recently implementing free school meals and in addition they are doing these programs, breakfast in the classroom in all their elementary schools, grab and go in their middle and high schools. They have seen a dramatic increase in their attendance. It's jumped from 35% or excuse me, 58% of their kids attending 90% of the time to 91% of the kids in just one year.

**Moderator:** Wow.

**Jessica Pino:** It's a great article to show a local district doing great work.

**Moderator:** Yeah. Those are eye catching numbers. That's terrific. Now as schools are working to implement the changes into their own districts, are there resources or recommendations that you would like to share with our listeners?

**Jessica Pino:** Yes. We would love for schools to really look at the participation in their districts. Set goals for improvement. That starts by making breakfast part of the school day. Really expanding accessibility,

availability and participation in school breakfast programs is one of the best ways to support the health and academic potential of students across New York State. Making breakfast part of the school day, schools can address local policy to address breakfast service. Some districts can argue that serving breakfast just -- having it as part of their local wellness policy might not be strong enough. So some schools have made it board level policy. So make sure that breakfast is really raised to that standard and make sure it's important. Also, people have found success in having school wellness policies incorporate breakfast. Some examples of what those policies include is requiring all their schools in their district to offer school breakfast. In New York State, the legislation requires if schools have 40% of free/reduced price percentage of children, they are required, under state legislation, to operate the program. They can opt you out of the program by showing disinterest. Strong local policy level can help address that and make sure districts are taking it upon themselves to have all schools operate school breakfast. And also those policies can incorporate those innovative models we were talking about, breakfast in the classroom, for example. Providing universally free breakfast is a great way to help kids get access to breakfast.

**Moderator:** And providing breakfast to all children at no cost, are there benefits to doing that?

**Jessica Pino:** Definitely. So schools that use the universal approach where all school meals are free or just breakfast have seen boosts in participation, really addressing stigma and being part of the school culture that everyone eats. Also, it optimizes switching that into the alternative models like breakfast in the classroom. It makes it easier to run the programs. Also, they have links where schools offer free breakfast to all students based on improvement in academic performance as well.

**Moderator:** Great. We have a few questions. If you could quickly talk about the community eligibility programs and the cost of offering universal breakfast.

**Jessica Pino:** Sure. Community eligibility is a new provision that happened under the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act. It's a comprehensive provision but it's a great option for high needs schools to offer free meals to all their kids. A snapshot of New York State, 67 school districts participate and 416 individual school buildings operate community eligibility. Really, the idea and the goal of community eligibility is to allow high poverty schools to feed more students and focus on quality rather than paperwork. With community eligibility and how it works, this is not based on a percentage of free and reduced priced kids. This is the percentage of low income kids and kids that are directly certified for free meals. What that means is that schools who live in households with Tanif, SNAP, Medicaid, FDPIR and also homeless migrants, or foster care, or head start. Those are directly certified for free school meals, those children. Schools must meet a 40% threshold the identified students, then from there, school can choose to implement eligibility district wide within buildings or within groupings. It's been a powerful option. Schenectady, as I mentioned earlier, has been utilizing this option to offer free school meals to their kids. It's really shown success already in New York State. We are excited to see it expand nationwide.

**Moderator:** Excellent. On the screen a moment ago, there was contact information. Do you welcome viewers to get in touch with you?

**Jessica Pino:** Yeah please get in touch especially about technical assistance or community eligibility or more information about the alternative models we talked about. We would love to talk more.

**Moderator:** Excellent. Thank you so much for all the information. This is such a rich topic. One of the questions that came in asked, 'do the new guidelines take into account food allergies or special diets such as being vegan?' And this came from New York City.

**Margo Wootan:** So the nutrition standards really lay out which kinds of foods, like which food group, fruit, vegetable, protein, whole grain. It's up to the school district itself to decide which foods to serve. Usually, they look at those kinds of issues. Some individually. If a child has severe allergies and some culturally, some school districts will look at what the needs are, the interest of their student population and try to match it. Deciding about issues like that are at the school district level.

**Moderator:** Okay, thank you. Another question, 'school breakfasts have a reputation for not being very healthful. Is that really the case?'

**Jessica Pino:** I think what's really -- there's always a great opportunity to connect with your schools. Margot did a great job of talking how the nutrition standards have come up to par especially 2014-15 school year, we are going to see even more improvements in the school program. So, I really encourage parents, community members, if you are interested in what's going on at school to get this contact with your local schools. Sometimes what we think would be a white bagel that's served in the classroom, it is a whole grain bagel because it needs to meet the requirements set forth in the program.

**Margo Wootan:** And actually, schools are generally meeting, in the past, have had an easier time meeting nutrition standards for breakfast than for lunch. So we'll see what happens because the new nutrition standards because the breakfast standards are still being phased in, they're not fully implemented.

**Moderator:** Well thank you both so much for being here I think this was a wonderful program with a lot of great information for our viewers.

**Margo Wootan:** Thanks for having us.

**Jessica Pino:** Thanks so much.

**Moderator:** Sure. And thank you very much for joining us today. Please remember to fill out our evaluations online. feedback is helpful to the development of our programs and continuing education credits are available. To obtain nurse continuing education hours, CME, and CHES credits, visit [phlive.org](http://phlive.org) and complete the evaluation and posttest for today's offering. Additional information on upcoming broadcasts and relevant public health topics can be found on our Facebook page. Don't forget to like us on Facebook to stay up to date. As a reminder, you can download the companion guide to this webcast on our website [phlive.org](http://phlive.org). The companion guide provides you with learning activities to help further your knowledge and understanding of topics discussed in this program. This broadcast will be available on demand in two weeks. DVDs of any of our Public Health Live broadcasts can be ordered

from our website as well. Please join us for the next web cast on March 20th on comprehensive school physical activity programs. I'm Rachel Breidster. Thank you so much for joining us today on Public Health Live.