

HealthierUS School Challenge for Elementary Schools

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Application Procedures

- 1. My school district has a foodservice committee in place, but its purpose serves all schools in our district. Is it possible to apply for School Challenge as a district, as opposed to individual schools?**

To meet the *Gold*, *Silver* or *Bronze* criteria, each school must have a level of commitment by the administration, faculty, school foodservice staff and parents—therefore the application must come from the individual school—not the district level.

We commend you for your interest in the HealthierUS School Challenge at the district level. If menus are planned centrally, including menu items for a la carte sales, and they meet the menu criteria of the HealthierUS School Challenge, your schools have a head start. We hope you will take the same leadership role you have demonstrated with your district foodservice committee in encouraging and assisting all of your schools to apply for the HealthierUS School certification.

- 2. In my small independent school district, the foodservice manager, the foodservice director, and the Team Nutrition Leader are all the same. Can my school still apply?**

Yes. Make note on your school's documentation which people have the same positions and have these person(s) sign on the appropriate designated line. It is important that the school assessment be as broadly based as possible.

- 3. Does a school have to meet ALL seven of the criteria for the *Bronze* and *Silver* and ALL nine of the criteria for the *Gold* certification?**

To receive a *Bronze* or *Silver* certification a school must meet all of the criteria listed under the *Bronze/Silver* category (1 through 7). For the *Gold* certification a school must meet all of the *Bronze/Silver* requirements plus offer fresh fruits or raw vegetables every day of the week and whole grain foods every day of the week. Also, the a la carte and/or vended items must meet the requirements outlined in *Gold* Certification, 3 a and b.

- 4. There are several elementary schools within my school district that qualify for either the *Gold*, *Silver* or *Bronze* HealthierUS School Challenge criteria. However, an SMI review has only been conducted at one of the schools. Can the others apply?**

Yes they can. An SMI review requires the selection of a minimum of one school which represents the SFA's ability to meet the school meals nutrition standards. If your school district (SFA) has had an SMI review within the prior five years, your State agency has approved your plans for any areas noted as needing corrective action or improvement, you have completed all identified activities, and the review was closed by the State agency—all of your schools meet the initial SMI criteria for the Healthier US School Challenge.

5. Why does USDA require schools to be enrolled in Team Nutrition before they can apply for the HealthierUS School certification? Why can't an SFA enroll all its schools in Team Nutrition at one time instead of requiring individual application?

USDA views the HealthierUS School Challenge as one of the strategies of Team Nutrition (TN)—to build school and community support to encourage schools to adopt policies that promote healthy eating and physical activity. TN schools are part of the national TN database and receive periodic mailing of TN materials and resources. Such contact helps support TN school in their efforts. USDA believes each school should demonstrate its commitment to this strategy by enrolling in Team Nutrition. The signatures of the school's principal and foodservice manager are the demonstration of that commitment. Also, TN requires the designation of a TN School Leader, necessitating an individual application.

Menu Criteria

1. For the menu criteria, does a school have to meet ALL nine categories?

Yes, the school's menus must meet or exceed all of the standards/criteria set under the lunch menu criteria.

2. What's the basis for requiring schools to plan and serve menus that meet the menu criteria for school lunches in order to be certified? Aren't school lunches already required to meet the School Meals Initiative (SMI) nutrition standards?

Yes, school lunches are required to meet the SMI nutrition standards. However, to assess whether the applying school meets these standards would require a school's submission of a nutrient analysis of the menus. USDA does not want to burden schools with this requirement, nor State agencies in having to verify the nutrient analysis, so has chosen to require schools to demonstrate that menus are being planned and served that meet the principles of the Dietary Guidelines. This requirement, coupled with the SMI review criteria, provides confidence that the school is offering students healthy school meal choices.

- 3. Our school would like to apply for the HealthierUS School Challenge. In reviewing the menu criteria we see that dried beans or peas must be offered at least once per week. Why is this required? Please give examples.**

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines stress more legumes (dry beans) because they provide a broad array of vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients. They are also a great source of dietary fiber. The most commonly consumed dried legumes are pinto beans, Great Northern or navy beans, kidney or red beans, black beans, lentils, garbanzo beans (chickpeas), cowpeas, split peas, dried mature lima beans (white beans), and black-eyed peas. For school foodservice these can be purchased in the dried form and cooked at the school, or purchased as canned, cooked dried beans or peas. They can be served as an entrée or meat/meat alternate, a cooked vegetable, in soups or chilies, or served chilled as one of the choices on a salad bar.

- 4. Why the emphasis on so many fruits and vegetables, especially the requirement for fresh fruits and vegetables in the menu criteria? Aren't dried, canned, and/or frozen fruits and vegetables just as nutritious?**

Different fruits and vegetables are rich in different nutrients so several criteria stress fruit and vegetable variety. Fruits and vegetables provide a variety of micronutrients including vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals. Greater consumption of fruits and vegetables is associated with reduced risk of cancers, reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, and may be useful to achieve and sustain weight loss. The difference in the nutritional contribution of fresh, frozen, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables may be negligible in many instances, but the requirement for offering fresh fruits or vegetables three or more times per school week (daily for the gold certification) was added to further increase variety and fruit and vegetable acceptability. There are some fruits and vegetables that are predominantly available only in the raw state, e.g., melons, bananas, strawberries, kiwi, oranges, grapes, and different varieties of salad greens. This requirement exposes children to a variety of flavors and textures of fruits and vegetables.

- 5. What do “4 different entrees or meat/meat alternates (M/MA) offered during a school week” mean? Does this mean that 4 different choices of entrée or meat/meat alternates must be offered each school day?**

This criterion does not mean that a school has to offer choices from four different entrées or meat/meat alternate menu items on a daily basis but rather offer a *variety* of entrée or meat/meat alternate menu items over the school week—not just hamburger and/or pizza everyday. USDA is aware that budgetary limitations require SFAs to plan menus that efficiently make use of USDA donated commodities, such as ground beef. In spite of these limitations, SFAs are encouraged to follow the principles of good menu planning by planning entrée or meat/meat alternate menu items that appear different and varied to students. For example, ground beef can be offered as various menu items such as Meatballs and Spaghetti, Beef Tacos, Salisbury Steak, Hamburger on Bun, etc. rather than offering just hamburger and/or pizza several

times a week. Using the principles of menu planning entices students to choose school meals and offers a variety of nutrients.

Different entrées or meat/meat alternates are therefore defined as variations in form, texture, etc. and not necessarily different types of meat/meat alternate (beef, ham, chicken, eggs, fish, etc). However, SFAs should be aware that varying the types of meat/meat alternate such as pork, beef, fish, chicken, egg, dried beans, etc. as frequently as possible ensures that a variety of nutrients are offered.

The criterion further states that if daily choices are not provided, the school limits higher fat entrees to once a week. Higher fat entrees are defined as those having 40% or more of calories from fat, excluding nut butters (peanut butter, etc.) which contain predominantly monounsaturated fats.

6. What if a school does offer a hamburger and/or pizza each school day as a daily choice but additionally offers other entrée/meat meat-alternate choices? Would this school meet the 4 different entrees or meat/meat alternates per week criterion?

The school could meet the criterion if at least four different entrees were offered each school week, e.g., hamburger and/or pizza daily, and additionally the school offers other entrées/MMA such as a salad bar, potato bar, baked chicken, baked ham, and baked fish strips throughout the school week.

7. We are having problems finding products that meet the criterion for offering whole grain products three times a week (*Bronze/Silver*) or every school day (*Gold*). Please tell us how to identify such products and give us examples.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines are putting great emphasis on increasing consumption of whole grains. Whole grains show added benefit in reducing the risk of such chronic diseases as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and controlling weight. Whole grains have at least 18 known nutrients, including fiber, B vitamins, magnesium, iron, zinc, vitamin E, phytochemicals, and antioxidants.

The local school review committee should review the label/ingredient list on each product's ingredient statement to determine whether a product meets the HealthierUS School Challenge criteria. A whole grain should be the first grain ingredient listed, indicating it is the *primary* grain of the product. For many whole-grain products, the words *whole* or *whole grain* will appear before the grain ingredient's name. Wheat flour, enriched flour, and degerminated cornmeal are not whole grains. Whole grains that are widely available in the U.S. are:

- Brown rice
- Bulgur (cracked wheat)
- Graham flour (coarsely ground whole wheat flour)
- Whole oats (oatmeal)
- Whole-grain barley

- Whole grain corn
- Whole rye flour
- Whole wheat flour

You might also look for the whole-grain health claim—“Diets rich in whole-grain foods and other plant foods and low in total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol may help reduce the risk of heart disease and certain cancers”—on food product labels. FDA requires that foods that bear the whole-grain health claim must:

- Contain 51% or more whole grains by weight
- Be low in fat

- 8. Our school district understands the importance of whole grains in the diet and we are working with our menus to meet the criteria for the HealthierUS School Challenge. However, our students have yet to establish a preference for predominantly whole grain products. We believe they will develop a preference if we have a phase-in period where we offer products that contain some whole grain. For example, we bake our own breads in our schools. We would like to spend this first year with a formula of 1/3 whole wheat flour to 2/3 white flour and gradually increase the whole wheat until students are accepting the change. Would this plan meet the criteria?**

Your schools are to be commended for baking breads for the students. The fresh aroma of school-made breads is a great enticement to school meal participation. However, USDA is strongly committed to recognizing schools that are making an effort to offer students *whole grain products*, so the menu criteria for *Silver* certification will remain to offer students a whole grain food 3 or more times a week and for the *Gold* certification, offer a whole-grain product each school day. The HealthierUS School Challenge criteria define a whole grain product as a product with whole grain as the first grain ingredient, indicating that it is the primary grain. Therefore your school-made rolls should contain at least 51% of the grain as whole wheat flour if white flour is the only other grain ingredient.

There are lots of other ideas for incorporating whole grains in school meals, such as offering baked whole-grain corn tortillas, combining brown rice with white rice, mixing whole wheat pasta with regular pasta, making sandwiches with one slice of whole wheat and one slice of white bread, and making cookies with whole wheat flour. Because the 2005 Dietary Guidelines emphasize that half of the breads/grains in the diets be whole-grain, or a minimum of three servings of whole grain products per day, industry has begun to develop many more products that contain whole grains. Schools should see an increase in availability.

- 9. Under the menu criteria, for the whole grain foods—if I make just five cold sandwiches on whole wheat bread as a menu choice, does that count for this requirement?**

The intent of the HealthierUS School Challenge is to make healthy and permanent changes in menus. While the criteria do not quantify foods such as whole-wheat items, serving only five sandwiches does not meet the intent of making menus healthier.

However, such a situation **should** warrant more investigation to determine if the school is making a good faith effort to improve the menus. For example, if the school is implementing Offer Vs Serve, starting out with five sandwiches may be a viable method to introduce whole wheat bread to the children. The school must show that every child has the opportunity to select a sandwich made with whole wheat bread by preparing the sandwiches using the batch or staggered cooking method. There should always be whole wheat sandwiches available on the line. As the children become more accepting, the quantity of whole wheat sandwiches should increase.

10. Can flax seed be counted as a whole grain?

No, flax seed is not a grain. Grains are generally the seeds of various grasses. Flax seed is a seed product of a flowering plant, and is not considered to be a grain product.

11. Can popcorn be counted as a whole grain?

No, popcorn is a whole grain, as defined by the Dietary Guidelines, but in school meal programs, popcorn is considered a snack food item and is not credited as a grain/bread.

12. If I offer 100% juice with vitamin C every day, does this count for the vitamin C criteria?

Juice may only be counted twice during the week for this requirement. The juice must be 100% full strength and made from a natural source such as oranges. Only these 100% full strength, natural juices with vitamin C meet the criteria. All other fruit drinks and mixes do not qualify.

Nutrition Education and Physical Activity Criteria

1. Why was there no *quantity* of nutrition education and/or physical activity specified?

At this time USDA has decided to not quantify the amount of nutrition education and physical activity required for certification to avoid placing a burden on schools and State agencies in determining how to actually count minutes of nutrition education and/or physical activities. For example, is nutrition education classroom instruction only, nutrition posters in the cafeteria, nutrition messages sent home to parents, or all of the above? The main requirements of the nutrition education criteria are that

nutrition education be 1) provided to at least half, but no fewer than two, of the grade levels in the school; 2) delivered as part of a structured and systematic unit of instruction; and 3) involve multiple channels of communication.

In addition, although we do not dictate that the school must offer physical education as part of the school curriculum, that would be ideal. The opportunity for physical activity criterion specifies that physical education classes *or the equivalent* must be provided on a regularly scheduled basis. Examples of equivalent are provided in the *HealthierUS* School Challenge posted on the Team Nutrition web site: www.teamnutrition.usda.gov (Click on “Healthy Schools”.)

Criteria for Foods and Beverages Sold a La Carte and/or Vended Items

1. Do these criteria eliminate selling whole milk either a la carte and/or through school vending? Why?

Yes they do. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines specifies that Americans increase the daily intake of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk and milk products. While reduced fat milk (2% fat) does not meet the definition of nonfat or low-fat, the criterion allows reduced fat milk, along with nonfat and/or low-fat milk to be sold a la carte or through school vending.

2. Why was a 200 calorie limit put on portions of items for vended sale?

A 200 calorie limit was placed upon pre-packaged vended or a la carte sales in an effort to control portion size and thus calories. Additionally, schools that prepare foods for a la carte sales, are required to limit the serving size to the serving size of the food served in the NSLP/SBP. The purpose of the HealthierUS School Challenge is to recognize schools that are taking steps to reduce the incidence of overweight in children. Controlling portion size is very important.

3. In the criteria for sales/service of a la carte and/or vended items, must the criteria for fruits and non-fried vegetables and approved beverages meet the same criteria specified for “any other individual food sales/service”. For example must a fruit or non-fried vegetable meet the limits on calories from fat and saturated fat, total sugar, and portion size?

No. USDA did not set additional criteria for fruits/non-fried vegetables or approved beverages than already described in the chart next to fruits/non-fried vegetables and approved beverages. The criteria for “any other individual food sales/service” are for individual food sales *other* than fruits/non-fried vegetables and the approved beverages.

For example, if a fruit or non-fried vegetable is offered for a la carte or vended sales, this item does not need to meet the criteria for calories from total fat, calories from saturated fat, total sugar, and portion size.

- 4. Our school is considering applying for *Gold* certification. Before we apply, however, we would like further clarification as to the *Gold* criteria, 3 (b). What types of food sales/service are included under “throughout the school day and throughout the school campus”? Does this address things sold by the school or does this include other school sponsored activities?**

This criteria includes all foods and beverages made available by the school, to students on the school campus, throughout the school day. Examples of food and beverage sales/service that would require meeting the nutrition guidelines or standards are:

- Foods or beverages sold a la carte in the school cafeteria
- Foods or beverages sold in vending machines, school stores, or snack bars that are operated by the school
- School-sponsored food and beverage sales during the school day

Schools are not expected to monitor what a child brings in his/her lunch bag or what a parent sends to school for a birthday party.

Participation Criteria

- 1. Why was the school lunch average daily participation (ADP) criterion set at 70 percent for Silver and Gold applications?**

Data from the *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II* (July 2001) indicated that the average daily participation, based upon enrollment, of elementary schools randomly selected for this national study was 67%. It was determined that an elementary school being nationally recognized as having an excellent school nutrition program should exceed this national average.

- 2. Our school has a low percentage of students approved for free and reduced meals, thus our participation is low. Will USDA make allowances for lowering the ADP for such schools?**

No. The USDA school meals programs are for all children, not just the needy. USDA believes that any school recognized as having excellence in nutrition should exceed the national average of school lunch participation. Meals that are planned and prepared to meet quality standards should be appealing to all children in the school. Our studies indicate that school meal participation is inversely related to a la carte sales, i.e., schools with the highest levels of NSLP participation reported the least a la carte revenue and schools with the lowest levels of NSLP participation reported the

most a la carte sales. Your school may find that by reducing the number of a la carte sales, your NSLP participation increases.

- 3. The criterion states that October is a typical month of operation and to use it for calculating ADP; however, my school does not meet the 70% ADP for October but is now meeting it in February. Does our school have to wait until after next October to apply for the HealthierUS School *Gold, Silver or Bronze* certification?**

No. If you can document that in recent months this school has actually increased participation and submit it with your application, it is likely your State agency will concur that the school can be recognized for its efforts.

- 4. In my school, kindergarten students do not stay for lunch. Must I include these students in my enrollment in order to calculate my ADP?**

It depends. If school lunch is not accessible or available for kindergartners, e.g., transportation picks them up prior to lunch, then you could eliminate them in the participation data. However, if you submit a monthly report to your State agency that includes these students in the enrollment, you may have difficulty when the State agency verifies your participation data. We would suggest you discuss this with your State agency or write a letter of explanation to your State agency and include it with your application and documentation.

Recognition

- 1. What type of recognition will schools receive if they receive the *Gold, Silver or Bronze* certification?**

FNS will review all completed Assessment Tools and documentation and award schools that successfully meet the Challenge with an appropriate recognition plaque. In addition, the recognized schools will be listed on the Team Nutrition web site, and may be chosen to be a part of national FNS media events that recognize schools for their leadership and excellent school meals program.

Recordkeeping/Documentation

- 1. What kind of recordkeeping and/or documentation is required of schools after they have received certification?**

Your school must keep copies of the following documents that were included with your application on file during the certification period:

- Copies of menus served and required menu documentation (food production records).
- Nutrition facts labels, or recipes if school-made, for products sold/served under provisions of #7(b) *Bronze/Silver Criteria* and #3(b) *Gold Criteria*.