

# School Lunch Toolkit for Change:

MAKING HEALTHY, CLIMATE-FRIENDLY  
FOOD SERVICE A REALITY.



“There are variations on the theme of optimal diet for human health, but all of them are made up mostly of whole, wholesome plant foods.”

— *Dr. David Katz*

*Founding Director, Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center*



# The Scoop: School Lunch 101

**E**very day, families send their kids off to school for a quality education and what we all hope includes a fulfilling, healthy meal. To meet that need, school food service professionals across the country serve 5 billion lunches a year to more than 30 million kids. However, many schools—with limited budgets, equipment and staff—face an uphill battle because our current food system is not set up to offer nutritious meals that nourish growing children and our planet. Therein lies both the problem, and the opportunity, for schools, passionate parents, students and administrators to make an impact on the health of their school community by offering delicious, plant-based, climate-friendly foods.

## What is “Healthy, Climate-Friendly Food”?

Healthy, climate-friendly food service achieves a lower carbon and water footprint than traditional food service by offering a wider array of healthy, plant-based and plant-forward foods, reducing food waste and when possible, sourcing food from regenerative farms that use carbon-enhancing, healthy soil practices. The shift to climate-friendly food is inclusive of farm-to-school initiatives that prioritize local, organic and fresh ingredients and that educate students about the power of food to build healthy people and healthy minds, while benefiting local farming communities and the environment.



# WHY EAT PLANT-BASED?

**Plant-based diets are full of vegetables**, fruits, legumes, grains, nuts, and seeds, and are free of meat, dairy, and eggs. Healthy, climate-friendly food service achieves a lower carbon and water footprint than traditional food service by offering a wider array of plant-based and plant-forward foods.

Research **clearly shows** that a plant-based diet can be the healthiest way to eat. In fact, people who eat either a vegetarian or fully plant-based diet are at **reduced risk** of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, certain types of cancer, and obesity.

Eating plant-based is also the **best thing we can do for the planet**. That's because animal foods are produced in factory farms, where animals are fed a diet of soybeans and grains that require large amounts of water, energy and pesticides. These massive animal operations also generate enormous amounts of pollution and waste. Animal agriculture is a **major greenhouse gas emitter** and a leading driver of **deforestation** and **species extinction**. In fact, beef generates **20 times more greenhouse gas emissions** than beans, per gram of protein.



## How can I help?

The good news is, you can make a difference. We know that school lunch programs are complicated. Food Service Directors are hard-pressed to serve healthy food while working within tight budgets, with minimal staff and under-resourced facilities, all while complying with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines and pleasing student palates. Yet schools across the country are beginning to make changes—and that's where you come in.

**One Meal a Day (OMD)**, **Chef Ann Foundation**, **Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM)** and **Friends of the Earth** have joined together to support students, caregivers, parents, schools and engaged local communities to help shift schools toward healthy, climate-friendly food.

This toolkit was designed to help you inform, inspire, and galvanize your school or district toward adding more healthful, plant-based options for their breakfast, lunch, snack, and supper programs. This is especially important in communities where children lack access to healthy, fresh food at home. By working together, we can build a healthier world for our children, one school cafeteria at a time.



# Six Steps to Create Change

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**The Ask:** Offer at least one healthy, plant-based entrée and **dairy-free drink option** daily. Additionally, serve an exclusively plant-based meal once a week.

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# 1

## Step 1: Team Up

**Getting more plant-based meal options at your school will be easier and more fun if you're working with others.** Don't be shy: recruit friends, students, parents, and teachers. If you're a parent, consider speaking up at a PTA meeting to ask for support. Students can try working with student body representatives and getting parents on board. You can even reach out to Team OMD ([info@omdfortheplanet.com](mailto:info@omdfortheplanet.com)) and Friends of the Earth ([climatefriendlyfood@foe.org](mailto:climatefriendlyfood@foe.org)). If you need resources, ideas, or just moral support, we're here to partner with you.



## 2

## Step 2: Understand Your School District's Kitchens

Arm yourself with information before reaching out to school officials:

- **Learn about your school's kitchen.** Is it only designed for heat-and-serve or does it have the proper equipment for scratch cooking? If allowed, join the kids for a meal to get a better understanding of what's being served and what students like.
- **Check out the current menu.** Has your school tried a Meatless Monday? Are there plant-based options already being offered? If so, are they more substantial than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? Which menu items could be easily swapped out or upgraded?



- **In-house or outsourced.** Does your district operate its own food services program, or do they contract out to a food service company?
- **Give credit where it's due.** What is your district already doing well, and what can be improved? Knowing this ahead of time will help you succeed in making change.



# 3

## Step 3: Schedule a Meeting

**Check the school's website or call the office** to find out who you should talk to. The Food Service Director is the person who determines the menu at most school districts. His or her main job is to serve healthy, nutritious food to students, and they will want to hear from you. Send an email or call to schedule a meeting to present information outlining why you're asking them to offer at least one plant-based meal option a day or make the menu 100% plant-based once a week (a la **Meatless Mondays**). See a **sample letter/email** to a food service director.



# 4

## Step 4: Prepare Your Argument

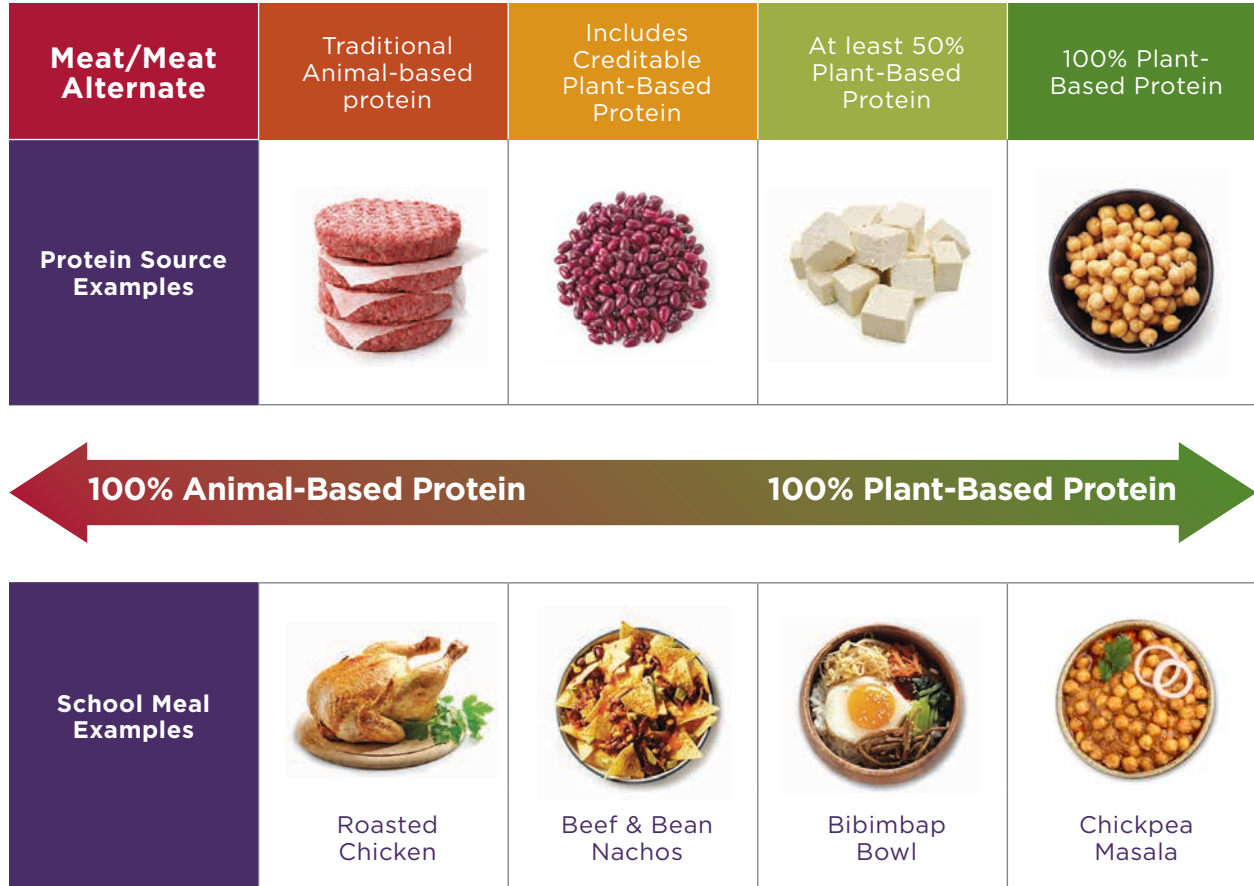
- **Draft a letter to your school district’s Food Service Director** outlining your request and explaining the reasons behind it. If you’re not sure what to say, start with our [template](#). Ask other parents and teachers to co-sign the letter and attend the meeting to build support.
- **Anticipate possible questions.** Here’s an overview of [common Food Service Director concerns](#), including tips from PCRM on how best to approach your school.



- **You will be one step ahead** if you have an understanding of some of the main concerns of Food Service Directors:
  - There isn’t enough demand in our school district
  - It’s too expensive, won’t work with our budget
  - The products are not available where we live or, on our bid, or within our ordering system
  - Kids won’t like the new plant-based entrée
  - Kids will just throw it away and worsen our food waste problem
  - Our kitchen staff doesn’t know how to make plant-based options

- Gather some tried and true [plant-forward](#) and [plant-based recipes](#) so you can offer solutions. You can find a comprehensive list of popular plant-based and vegetarian recipes compiled by Friends of the Earth [here](#).

### The Plant Forward Continuum



We encourage schools to start slowly, beginning by reflecting on the existing menu mix, then strategically adding or adjusting recipes that move the overall menu mix along the continuum.

*The Plant Forward Continuum courtesy of Chef Ann Foundation*

# 5

## Step 5: Meet with the Director

Now is the time to put all your research and preparation to use. Arrive ready to back your requests up with solid resources. Don't forget to enlist your friends and fellow supporters to attend, too.

- Review your materials. If you can, show **a short video**. Share your **resource packet** and **letter**, and share why plant-based options are important.
- Share an anecdote or other success stories to make your case more compelling.
- Listen to and acknowledge any concerns, then work together to find solutions.
- Offer contact information and support from organizational partners (**Chef Ann Foundation**, **One Meal a Day**, **Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine**, and **Friends of the Earth**).
- Discuss next steps, and let them know you plan to follow up.



## 6

## Step 6: Follow Up

After your meeting, follow up with a letter or email thanking the person for their time and outlining the next steps you discussed. Then circle back to check on their progress. Don't hesitate to keep reaching out. Food Service Directors are typically quite busy! If they expressed any questions or concerns in your first meeting, get back to them with additional information or resources. The Physicians Committee can assist you in finding a qualified healthcare professional to attend a follow-up meeting should further explanation be helpful on how plant-based meals meet nutrition needs.

*“Nothing will benefit human health and increase the chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.” — Albert Einstein*



## If You Meet Resistance

While many food service directors will be open to discussing plant-based meals, you might not always get the response you're hoping for. If you're met with resistance, try these avenues:

- Enlist support among other key influencers in your school, such as teachers and principals. Ask for a separate meeting to provide them with the same information you presented to the Food Service Director and ask them to also contact the Food Service Director to help.
- Reach out to school board members. If you can find someone on the school board to support your cause, they can champion the issue in discussions with school administrators, or place it on the agenda at community meetings. Start by writing a [letter](#) or asking for a meeting.

For more ideas, visit the [Chef Ann Foundation's Parent Advocacy Initiative](#).



# Next Steps

**Changing the lunch menu is a great start**, but there's more you can do. Try these next steps to keep the momentum going:

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## Raise Awareness on Campus

To help bring students and families along, consider distributing educational materials on campus to raise awareness about the health and environmental benefits of plant-based eating. Friends of the Earth and Chef Ann Foundation offer excellent, shareable [materials](#). Work with your school principal and favorite teachers to get these materials into classrooms, on bulletin boards, and inside cafeterias.

## Get an Institutional Commitment

In order to ensure lasting change, consider asking decision-makers to institutionalize the practice of healthy, climate-friendly food service. See if your school can officially commit to Meatless Mondays, support a wellness policy, or agree to follow the [Good Food Purchasing Standards](#) that include targets for more plant-based meals and fewer animal products. Some states including [California](#), [New York](#), and [Hawaii](#) have adopted resolutions urging school districts to serve a plant-based option at every meal. These and other policies are excellent tools for setting goals and ensuring progress in each school district.

## Share Success Stories

Looking for inspiration? Check out these stories of schools that are leading the way in healthy, plant-based nutrition for kids:

- **[Oakland Unified School District](#)** reduced its meat and dairy purchases, saving water, cutting back on greenhouse gas emissions and saving money.
- **[Los Angeles Unified](#)** was the first school district to serve daily vegan meals in a pilot project at seven schools over the 2017-18 school year. The school district now plans to have at least 35 schools in the program by the end of the 2018-19 school year.
- School districts including Oakland Unified, San Francisco, Boulder Valley and Chicago Public Schools have adopted the **[Good Food Purchasing Policy](#)**. This commits to reducing meat and other conventional food products, with the goal of supporting the environment, local economy, public health, animal welfare, and workers' rights.
- **[Fifteen Brooklyn schools](#)** adopted "Meatless Monday" in October 2017.
- **[According to the USDA](#)**, 42,587 schools serving over 23 million students are now buying local produce and teaching students where their food comes from.
- Among school food directors who completed a **[national survey by the School Nutrition Association](#)**, 56.2% said they consistently offer vegetarian meals in at least one school in their district.



# Background



## The History of School Lunch Programs

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools, administered by the USDA. The NSLP was started by Congress in 1946 to promote good nutrition and provide new “markets” for farmers with excess food, whether it was good for kids or not. To this day, the food that the majority of schools serve is influenced by the government’s commodity program which heavily subsidizes conventional milk, meat and cheese.



Historically and today, the NSLP also reinforces inequality by providing insufficient funds, poor nutrition, and a limited ability to provide high quality lunches for those most in need. Schools are inequitably funded and supported, often falling along racial and economic lines. More on this [here](#).

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**For a deep dive into the history of the U.S. school lunch program, including crucial information on racial bias, general facts, and statistics, check out [this document](#).**

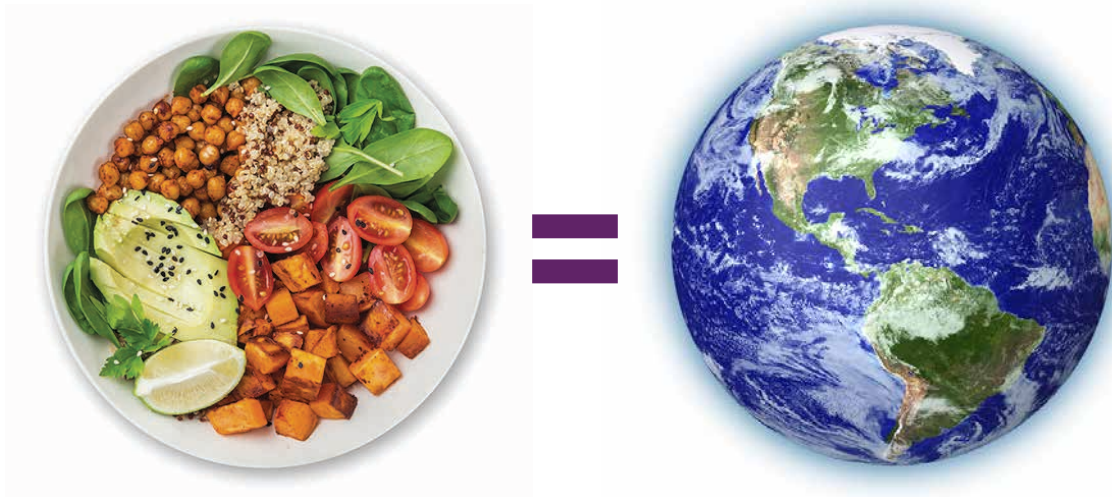
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## The Problems of the Modern Diet: Harmful to Our Health, Our Planet And Communities

Balanced nutrition is essential for growing bodies and minds. Yet many young people eat too much processed food and meat and are not eating the foods they need to thrive—fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. These are high-fiber, plant-based foods with nutrients critical to optimal health. In fact, 93% of children under age 18 aren't getting the recommended amount of vegetables, and 60% don't eat the recommended amount of fruit, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). The [2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) specifically urges teenage boys and men to eat less meat.

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**There is a direct link to the health of our planet and what's on our plates.  
Let's make the connection.**



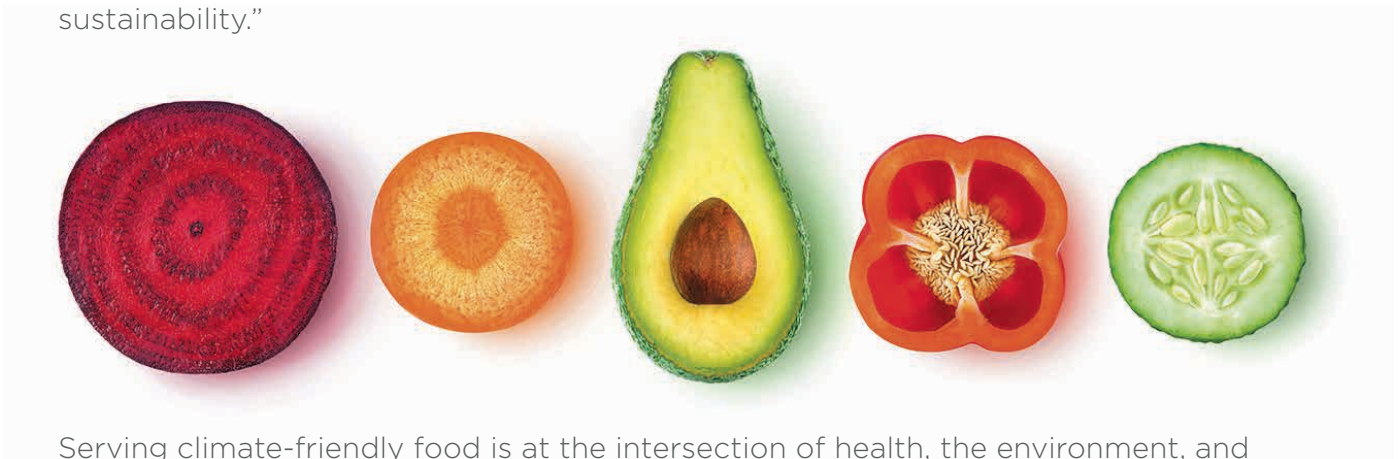
**Did you know that raising livestock is one of the major causes of deforestation and threats to endangered species around the world?** You read that right! Vital habitats are being lost in order to sustain unhealthy diets. Also, according to the United Nations

Food and Agriculture Organization, animal agriculture accounts for **14.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions**—more than all the entire transportation sector combined.

Asking our schools to serve more plant-based options is also an environmental and racial justice issue. For example, in places like North Carolina, noxious air and water pollution from industrialized hog operations’ waste disproportionately impacts nearby communities of color. The people around these farms suffer from higher rates of chronic illnesses due to pollution and runoff. Even in their homes, the air is thick and suffocating with the stench of ammonia and families are deprived of living in a safe and healthy environment.

## The Solution

The **2016 Menus of Change annual report** by the Culinary Institute of America and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health concludes that “greater emphasis on healthy-plant-based foods—including plant-based proteins—is the single most important contribution the food service industry can make toward environmental sustainability.”



Serving climate-friendly food is at the intersection of health, the environment, and social justice. We can make changes starting with what’s on our plates and work together to expand access for all—starting with at least one meal a day—to protect our kids and future generations.

# Share Your Story!

We would love to hear from you so we can celebrate and highlight your school! We also want to hear about challenges so that we can offer you support. Please keep us posted on your progress by emailing us at [info@omdfortheplanet.com](mailto:info@omdfortheplanet.com).



## Links and resources cited in this Toolkit

**Animal agriculture is a major greenhouse gas emitter:** <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/8/1/015009/pdf>

**A driver of deforestation:** [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/65505/6316-drivers-deforestation-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/65505/6316-drivers-deforestation-report.pdf)

**A driver of species extinction:** <http://advances.sciencemag.org/content/1/5/e1400253.short>

**20 times more greenhouse gas emissions:** <http://www.wri.org/blog/2016/04/sustainable-diets-what-you-need-know-12-charts>

**Dairy-free drink option:** <http://www.pcrm.org/health/healthy-school-lunches/nslp/offer-nondairy-milk-in-schools>

**Meatless Monday:** <http://www.meatlessmonday.com/meatless-monday-k-12/>

**Foodservice Director sample letter:** [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vH\\_v-nJANoXRI1FGCrCqHhfe6N7eGjKkqBn2p3ZhH90/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vH_v-nJANoXRI1FGCrCqHhfe6N7eGjKkqBn2p3ZhH90/edit)

**Foodservice Director concerns:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tKimxSSV\\_4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tKimxSSV_4&feature=youtu.be)

**Plant-forward recipes:** <http://www.thelunchbox.org/programs/plant-forward-initiative?tab=plant-forward-recipes>

**Plant-based recipes:** <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d1440029f1874f709cc95b/t/59d292be59cc68d3d9242811/1506972373371/K12+Recipes.pdf>

**Friends of the Earth recipes:** [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18iYon5EzUSs\\_0Goo91D102AV0GCjDKDe?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18iYon5EzUSs_0Goo91D102AV0GCjDKDe?usp=sharing)

**Short video for meeting:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVJv91n39Q8>

**Resource packet:** [https://omdfortheplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/School-Food-Toolbox\\_9.2018.pdf](https://omdfortheplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/School-Food-Toolbox_9.2018.pdf)

**Chef Ann Foundation email:** [info@chefannfoundation.org](mailto:info@chefannfoundation.org)

**One Meal a Day email:** [info@omdfortheplanet.com](mailto:info@omdfortheplanet.com)

**Friends of the Earth email:** [climatefriendlyfood@foe.org](mailto:climatefriendlyfood@foe.org)

**Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine email:** [hschoollunches@pcrm.org](mailto:hschoollunches@pcrm.org)

**School Board Member letter:** <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IPRMB8OHYtU9zyntBZ8IJqpHsIDNxv-NRDgq1k6Y8E/edit>

**Chef Ann Foundation's Parent Advocacy Initiative:** <http://www.chefannfoundation.org/for-parents/parent-advocacy-toolkit>

**Educational materials:** <http://www.thelunchbox.org/programs/plant-forward-initiative/?tab=tools-and-resources>

**Good Food Purchasing Standards:** <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/program-overview/#standards>

**California State Resolution:** [http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/03-04/bill/asm/ab\\_0001-0050/acr\\_16\\_bill\\_20030619\\_chaptered.pdf](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/03-04/bill/asm/ab_0001-0050/acr_16_bill_20030619_chaptered.pdf)

**New York State Resolution:** [http://nyassembly.gov/leg/?default\\_fld=&leg\\_video=&bn=J03971&term=2003&Summary=Y&Actions=Y&Floor%26nbspVotes=Y&Memo=Y&Text=Y](http://nyassembly.gov/leg/?default_fld=&leg_video=&bn=J03971&term=2003&Summary=Y&Actions=Y&Floor%26nbspVotes=Y&Memo=Y&Text=Y)

**Hawaii State Resolution:** [https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2008/Bills/SCR84\\_SD1\\_.pdf](https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2008/Bills/SCR84_SD1_.pdf)

**Oakland Unified School District success story:** [https://1bps6437gg8c169i0y1drt-gz-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/webiva\\_fs\\_2/FOE\\_FoodPrintExecSumm\\_7.pdf](https://1bps6437gg8c169i0y1drt-gz-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/webiva_fs_2/FOE_FoodPrintExecSumm_7.pdf)

**Los Angeles School District success story:** <https://www.livekindly.co/la-vegan-school-lunch-popularity/>

**Good Food Purchasing Policy success stories:** <https://goodfoodpurchasing.org/stories/>

**Brooklyn Schools success story:** <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/675-17/mayor-de-blasio-chancellor-fari-a-borough-president-adams-15-brooklyn-schools-to>

**USDA success story:** <http://www.farmtoschool.org/>

**School Nutrition Association survey:** [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/08/nutrition\\_competitive\\_foods\\_rules.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/08/nutrition_competitive_foods_rules.html)

**School food inequity:** <https://www.thenation.com/article/unappetizing-politics-school-lunches/>

**School lunch facts:** [https://omdfortheplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/School-Lunch-Facts\\_9.2018.pdf](https://omdfortheplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/School-Lunch-Facts_9.2018.pdf)

**Center for Disease Control statistics:** <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0805-fruits-vegetables.html>

**Dietary Guidelines for Americans:** <https://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/chapter-2/a-closer-look-at-current-intakes-and-recommended-shifts/>

**Animal Agriculture Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** <http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/8/1/015009/pdf>

**Menus of Change annual report:** [http://www.menusofchange.org/images/uploads/pdf/CIA-Harvard\\_2016MenuOfChangeAnnualReport.pdf](http://www.menusofchange.org/images/uploads/pdf/CIA-Harvard_2016MenuOfChangeAnnualReport.pdf)

For a clickable list, visit: <https://omdfortheplanet.com/school-lunch-toolkit-resources/>