

Plant-Based & Plant-Forward Menus in K-12 Schools: Good for Kids, Good for the Planet

*Advancing Nutrition, Equity, and Environmental Protection through
Plant-Based Options and Plant-Forward Menus in K-12 Schools*

Students and their families are increasingly asking for plant-based food at school for a wide variety of reasons, including cultural,¹ religious, health,² and philosophical reasons. While there are many students who specifically follow plant-based diets and *need* to have plant-based options at school, there are many more students who *prefer* to choose plant-based or plant-forward options some or most of the time. For example, a recent Bloomberg Intelligence Survey found that only 28% of Gen Z respondents reported eating meat on a weekly basis.³ Yet, despite commendable efforts from many school districts across the country to add plant-based options alongside meat and dairy-centered entrées, most school menus still do not regularly offer plant-based entrées beyond nut butter and jelly.⁴

Adding plant-based options and shifting to plant-forward menus are both key strategies for inclusive, healthy, and climate-friendly school food service.⁵

Defining Plant-Based and Plant-Forward

“Plant-based” entrées contain no animal products or byproducts. These options could also be called “vegan.” In the context of school food, our focus is on adding plant-based entrées that include a protein source, called the Meat/Meat Alternate component (e.g., a black bean burger without egg or cheese, a falafel wrap, or tofu nuggets).

“Plant-forward” entrées, meals, or menus feature plant-based sources of protein but still include some animal products (e.g., a bean and cheese burrito is a plant-forward entrée; a menu featuring vegetable curry with chicken or tofu, rice, an apple, and cow’s milk would be considered plant-forward).



Why plant-based options and plant-forward menus?

Equity and Inclusion:



School menus should include plant-based offerings to meet the needs of all students, including students following religious diets like Kosher, Halal, or vegetarian; students with lactose intolerance; and students avoiding common allergens like dairy and eggs. Because people of color are more likely to follow a plant-based diet than white people and have high rates of lactose intolerance,⁶ offering plant-based options is an important consideration for racial equity.

Health:



Leading public health authorities all encourage fiber-rich, plant-forward diets.⁷ Plant-forward menus would increase adherence with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which recommend increasing fiber (which comes solely from plants); consuming more beans, peas, and lentils; and replacing processed meats (e.g., hot dogs and deli meats) with plant-based proteins.⁸ Plant-forward diets reduce risk of heart disease, stroke, obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, and many forms of cancer.⁹

Food Insecurity:



Many students who do not eat animal products have a hard time getting enough food to eat at school.¹⁰ More plant-based options would help reduce hunger by ensuring all students, including those following plant-based diets, have a healthy option at school.

Meal Participation and Revenue:



Increasing plant-based foods and plant-forward entrées addresses unmet demand, which in turn boosts school food participation and thus program revenue. A recent Chartwells poll found that 37% of students would eat school lunch more often if there were more vegetarian and vegan options.¹¹ Plus, shifting to plant-forward menus can be a cost-neutral or even cost-saving strategy since many plant-based ingredients are less expensive than animal products (e.g., beans and lentils tend to be significantly less expensive than meat and poultry).¹² Also, given the overlap between plant-based foods and restricted diets like vegetarian, Kosher, and Halal, adding plant-based options streamlines menu planning and preparation for operators.

Economic Development:



Expanding plant-based options will boost economic development for the plant-based foods industry, which is forecasted to add thousands of well-paying jobs to the economy annually if current growth trends continue.¹³

Environmental Protection:



Plant-based foods have lower carbon emissions and require significantly fewer land and water resources.^{14,15} If high meat-consuming countries like the U.S. do not shift toward more plant-forward diets, we will not be able to meet global climate targets, avert the worst impacts of climate change, or feed the world's growing population.^{16,17,18} Small shifts from schools can make a huge difference: If every public school swapped out a beef burger for a protein-rich veggie burger *just once a month*, we would save over 956 million pounds of CO₂-eq—the equivalent of not burning 48 million gallons of gas.¹⁹

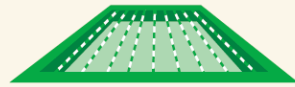
Plant-Forward Menus are a Win-Win-Win Strategy

FOOD SHIFTS MATTER

Over 2 years, Oakland Unified School District reshaped its menu with fewer animal foods and more protein-rich legumes and vegetables. This shift generated considerable **water** and **climate benefits**, and **cost savings**:



SAVED 42million
GALLONS OF
WATER



63
OLYMPIC SIZED
SWIMMING POOL




14% REDUCTION
IN THE
CARBON FOOTPRINT
OF ITS ENTIRE FOOD PURCHASES



15,000
TREES PLANTED



1.5million
FEWER MILES DRIVEN



87 SOLAR SYSTEMS INSTALLED
ON THE SCHOOL DISTRICTS' ROOFS



COST
SAVINGS

\$42,000



Adding plant-based options and shifting toward more plant-forward menus in K-12 schools offers a rare triple win for students, school food operators, and the environment. Progress is possible: School districts across the country – from New York City to Los Angeles, CA to Austin, TX, Urbana, IL, and Brookline, MA – are offering delicious plant-based options every day. California public schools have increased their plant-based menu offerings by 60% over the last five years.²⁰

“By offering daily plant-based options at our high schools and introducing our Plant-Based Wednesday initiative, students who follow a plant-based diet have expressed feelings of inclusion and support. Students who follow a flexitarian diet have shared a growing appreciation for being introduced to more plant-centric menu options.”

- Josh Goddard, Nutrition Service
Director at Santa Ana USD

friendly meals at school, cash-strapped school districts often need more resources, technical assistance, and financial support – along with policy changes that facilitate plant-based options and plant-forward menus.

That is why **Friends of the Earth’s Climate-Friendly School Food Program** helps school districts make the shift towards healthy, delicious, organic, plant-forward menus. We provide organic procurement and plant-based technical assistance and marketing materials, support student and community engagement strategies, and link school districts with the resources they need to be successful. We also partner with students, school districts, and NGOs through the Healthy Future Students and Earth Coalition (forkidsandtheplanet.org) to advocate for policy changes that help operators expand their plant-based offerings and shift toward plant-forward menus.

For resources, more information about our program, or to request support, please visit our website www.climatefriendlyschoolfood.org or email climatefriendlyfood@foe.org

But to scale these benefits and ensure all students have access to healthy, climate-

Endnotes

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