



Guidance for Food and Nutrition Education in New York City Public Schools and Early Childhood Centers

Over the past school year, we have seen significant progress on advancing the goals outlined in [the Food Education Roadmap](#). To check out our progress, please refer to our [One-Year Progress Report](#).

One of the highlights was the launch of New York City Public Schools's first-ever Food Education Grant Program, in which 60 elementary and middle schools received \$11,000 each (\$660,000 total) to partner with more than 25 food education nonprofit organizations. Schools had the opportunity to choose from the partners listed on our [Food Education Service Providers Airtable](#), where detailed information about programming is provided. Given the success of this program this year, we are excited to expand these grants to additional schools in the 2024-25 school year.

This spring, the Mayor's Office of Food Policy, New York City Public Schools, and the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy conducted observational visits to the grant schools. From these visits, we have gathered key insights to inform guidance for the implementation of food and nutrition education in public schools.

These educational opportunities are critical in developing informed, conscious consumers from an early age—students who understand the importance of healthy, sustainable foods for our bodies, our city, and our planet.

Best Practices

Research has shown that food and nutrition education is most effective at catalyzing behavior change and developing healthful eating habits when it:

- 1 Is grounded in the students' lived experiences.
- 2 Focuses on specific eating behaviors.
- 3 Inspires students to find their own motivation to eat healthfully.
- 4 Provides practical guidance and hands-on experiences with food.
- 5 Recognizes the challenges of the food environment and develops advocacy skills.

1. Food and nutrition education should be grounded in the students' lived experiences.

- **Consider the demographics and community of the school and incorporate culturally relevant foods or meals in food programming. For example:**
 - If the recipe you are making includes one kind of bean, ask students what other kinds of beans they eat at home that can be used in the same recipe.
 - If you have a vegetable where a recipe from one culture is being prepared, ask students to share how that vegetable might be used differently in their culture.
 - Grow a variety of leafy green vegetables that reflect what the school community might eat, like collard greens, swiss chard, callaloo, watercress, etc.
- **Consider non-food rewards:**
 - There are multiple non-food ways to reward children. Some include saying their name and offering specific praise, giving stickers, awarding tokens towards a group prize, or recapping the outstanding moments at the end of each lesson or during a larger ceremony.
 - Please note that giving out unhealthy, ultra-processed foods (e.g., candy, soda, etc.) as rewards inadvertently puts less healthy food on a pedestal and creates an impression that they are more desirable. This approach undermines our efforts to promote healthier choices.

2. Food and nutrition education should focus on specific eating behaviors.

- **Target one specific food and nutrition education behavior per lesson or activity:**
 - Examples of these behaviors include eating more fruits or vegetables, drinking more tap water, eating more plant-forward meals, drinking fewer sweetened beverages, and eating fewer processed snack foods.
 - Guide students in creating action plans that provide guidance for how to make concrete changes (e.g., “I will choose items from the salad bar at school lunch three times in the next week”).
 - General wellness topics (e.g., skincare) can be tied to food and nutrition education, but they should not be the sole focus of the lesson.
- **Connect your programming to New York City Public School lunches:**
 - Encourage students to take and eat school meals. In New York City, school meals adhere to strict nutritional standards (e.g., New York City’s Food Standards) and are often healthier than what children can and do bring from home.
 - School meals help increase food and nutrition security. Therefore, it is a perfect opportunity for young people to eat and enjoy new fruits, vegetables, and foods.
 - When cooking or preparing food, it is highly encouraged to explore and use the recipes on [New York City Public Schools’ website](#), which are featured on school menus.

3. Food and nutrition education should inspire students to find their own motivation to eat healthfully.

- **Get students to see the “why”:**
 - Discuss the benefits of healthful behaviors to inspire students to make positive changes.
 - Build social norms that celebrate healthy eating.
 - Discuss how what they choose to eat or drink relates to being and staying healthy.
 - Create positive self-identity around making healthful choices.
- **Consider how to connect food education to other school subjects:**
 - Recipes can be used to apply mathematical concepts, such as fractions and unit conversions (e.g., doubling or halving recipes and converting teaspoons to cups).
 - History and geography can be tied to the origins of various plants, cultural foods, and food traditions.
 - Journaling, storytelling, and assorted games can increase literacy and writing skills.
- **Build a positive relationship with food:**
 - Categorizing certain foods as “good” or “bad” can create feelings of shame and potentially contribute to disordered eating. It’s important to consider how comments may be perceived, as not every student will openly share their feelings. Instead, focus on promoting an overall healthy dietary pattern.
 - Recognize that body weight is complex and involves more than just food choices and physical activity. There are many factors involved, including genetics, environmental conditions, and social determinants of health.
 - We want to encourage a plant-forward diet. However, many families face food apartheid, with limited access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables and ready access to processed foods that are relatively inexpensive, shelf-stable, and accepted by children. Encourage a healthy diet without making students feel bad about their familial circumstances.

- **Emphasize that the same foods that are good for our health are also good for our planet:**
 - Our choices, especially our food choices, influence planetary health, too.
 - Students often are excited to do what they can to help our planet. Help students understand that making healthy, environmentally-conscious choices is a way they can show their love for our planet by making delicious and health-conscious choices.
 - Food waste is a significant contributor to planetary warming. Consider lessons on reducing and eliminating waste, using less plastic, composting, and, of course, eating more fruits, vegetables, and plant proteins.

4. Food and nutrition education should provide practical guidance and hands-on experiences with food.

- **Promote hands-on activities in which students will engage with and taste foods, and as often as possible to prepare the recipes:**
 - Encourage students to taste new foods, wash, chop, mix, and plate their own foods (as appropriate for their age).
 - Encourage students to explore foods with all their senses with a focus on fun (e.g., cooking, gardening, and games).
- **When cooking, consider discussing and testing ingredient alternatives or modifications to ingredients. For example:**
 - As a “science” experiment, swap applesauce for oil and compare the results.
 - Consider comparing one batch of zucchini bread using ½ tsp versus 1 ½ tsp of baking soda.
 - Note: this is also important for the possibility of food allergies or sensitivities, potential sensory or physical limitations (e.g., for District 75 students), and/or cultural or religious concerns.
- **Provide time-tested, food-based nutrition advice:**
 - Provide general dietary guidance based on the accepted US Dietary Guidelines, which recommend eating more minimally processed fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, along with encouraging regular physical activity.
 - Recognize that children may have unique medical conditions and needs. Providing specific (non-food) recommendations, such as taking multivitamins or using protein powders, can be potentially harmful.
 - Avoid commercial interests. Do not promote specific brands.

5. Food and nutrition education should recognize the challenges of the food environment and develop advocacy skills.

- **Address the reality that we live in a world dominated by ultra-processed foods:**
 - Address media literacy for students to recognize how advertisers target youth with advertisements for processed snack foods, beverages, and other less health-promoting items. Healthier items may not be marketed as frequently.
 - Conduct activities and have discussions that enable students to understand that our current food environment makes it challenging to eat healthfully. Over half of the foods that people are consuming in the United States are ultra-processed and are engineered to be irresistible (and, as the saying goes, “betcha you can't eat just one”). However, there are many other nourishing and delicious foods available waiting for students to experience.
 - Help students see the systemic issues of inequitable availability of healthful foods, which can reduce feelings of guilt and inspire students to want to make healthful choices.

If there are questions or additional information is required, please contact Sierra Hollowell at shollowell@foodpolicy.nyc.gov.