

Creating a Positive Food Environment in Schools

Students spend a large portion of their day at school, and creating a positive school food environment helps them learn, play, and grow. Schools should be a place that makes it easy for students to eat well and encourages students to develop a positive relationship with food.

What is the School Food Environment?

The school food environment includes components that are within your control such as the foods that are offered and sold at school, the language used to talk about food, and other elements that often involve food within your school such as rewards, celebrations, and fundraisers.

This resource provides tips to address these components to help create or maintain a positive food environment within your school.



Offer and sell foods that meet the policy and guidelines

Many schools offer or sell meals and snacks to students throughout the day, which presents an opportunity to provide a variety of foods from [Canada's Food Guide](#). When offering or selling food at school, refer to the two documents below that apply to the school setting in Ontario:

1. School Food and Beverage Policy (PPM-150)

- Applies to all food and beverages **sold** to students at school
- Based on the previous version of Canada's Food Guide (2007)
- Last updated in 2011
- Will be updated in the future - stay tuned!

2. Student Nutrition Program (SNP) Guidelines

- Applies to all food and beverages **offered** to students at school, as part of a Student Nutrition Program (e.g., breakfast or snack program)
- Based on the current Canada's Food Guide (2019)
- Last updated in 2020

It is suggested to use the SNP guidelines for all food and beverages **sold and offered** in schools, as they are current and more comprehensive from a nutritional standpoint. [See pages 34-39 in the SNP Guidelines](#) for meal and snack ideas. It should, however, be noted that school administrators must continue to follow, at a minimum, PPM-150 for items **sold** in schools.

The PPM 150 and SNP Guidelines are meant to be used **for adults making decisions about food offered or sold to students in the school setting**. They should **not** be used to support student food and nutrition education or to comment on food brought from home. Deciding what to pack in a lunch is the caregivers'/ parents' or student's responsibility, depending on age and ability. For more information, see the resources *Nurturing Healthy Eaters in [Elementary Schools](#) and [Secondary Schools](#)*.

Provide an appropriate eating environment

Ensure students have enough time to eat within the school's set meal and snack times. At least 20 minutes for meals is ideal. Minimize distractions, such as screen time (e.g., tablet, television, smart board), which can support students in being mindful of their hunger and fullness cues.

Adopt neutral language when talking about food

Talking about food in a neutral way can help students maintain a positive relationship with food. Labelling foods as "healthy" or "unhealthy", "good" or "bad", or "treats" or "junk food" can make some foods seem more desirable than others and create feelings of being "good" or "bad" based on what we eat. Instead, call food by its name (e.g., broccoli, candy, hamburger, apple, or cookie). Describe foods based on features like colour, texture, and flavour.



Promote positive body image

Recognize that bodies come in all different shapes and sizes. We cannot determine a person's health by their body shape or size. Keep conversations free of "diet talk" and teach students about body diversity and accepting, respecting, and celebrating our bodies. Avoid commenting negatively on your own body or the bodies of others, as well as imposing personal views about food or dieting practices (e.g., "I don't eat dairy so students shouldn't either"). For more information, see the resource [Mental Health and Weight Bias in Schools](#).

Involve students in preparing and growing food

The more students are exposed to a variety of foods, the better. Growing and preparing food helps increase students' interest in eating foods from Canada's Food Guide and can help promote mental well-being by building confidence and self-esteem.

Consider rewarding students with non-food items/activities

Rewards are commonly used to recognize achievements or to manage behaviour, and often involve food. When food is used as a reward, it can create lifetime habits of rewarding oneself with food, and places certain foods on a pedestal. Consider rewarding students with positive recognition, extra outdoor time, or other non-food items.

Fundraise and celebrate with non-food items or foods from Canada's Food Guide.

Movement, music, and special activities are an important part of celebrations. Consider hosting a dance party or special craft activity to celebrate, and fundraising with items such as greeting cards, plants or [local fruits and vegetables](#).

Support from a Public Health Dietitian is also available to review your school's food environment using a comprehensive school health approach.
Contact your local health unit for more information.

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