

Make 'Special Food' Days 'Healthy Days' at Your School!

Making the case for healthy 'special food' days

'Special food' days occur when lunch choices, either provided by local food service operators (eg, local sub or pizza shop) or prepared in the school by volunteers, are available for sale to students and staff. Most parents find 'special food' days a convenient way to offer lunch to their children; however, in schools 'special food' days are no longer an occasional treat. In many schools, they occur weekly and even daily. Schools have a tremendous opportunity to influence the eating behaviours of students in a positive way... provided they offer or sell only healthy food choices on 'special food' days.

What are healthy 'special food' days?

Healthy 'special food' day lunches include at least three of the four food groups in *Canada's Food Guide*, emphasize foods and beverages with Maximum Nutritional Value and contain no foods or beverages with Minimum Nutritional Value.

Success to share

Pine Glen Public School, located in Huntsville, had a 'Dunk the Junk' at a school assembly. They tossed a ceremonial hot dog, ketchup and mustard into a garbage pail and announced that tasty and healthy special food days would be on the way! They now offer pizza on whole wheat crust with veggies and lean meat toppings.

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Nutrition Tools for Schools



Benefits of healthy 'special food' days

A healthy 'special food' day:

- Reinforces the classroom healthy eating education
- Provides an opportunity for students to try new foods with their friends
- Provides parents with a 'guilt-free' break from packing lunches
- Makes money for the school
- Links to the 'whole school approach' to creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment
- Shows parents and the local community that the school takes the health of its students seriously

'Special food' day menu ideas

'Special food' day menu ideas:

- Submarine sandwiches made with whole wheat bread, lean ham or turkey, cheese, lettuce and tomato, served with canned fruit (in juice or light syrup) or fresh fruit and white milk (2% MF or less)
- Ham, pineapple and cheese pizza on a whole wheat crust served with carrot sticks, white milk (2% MF or less) and an apple
- Salad bar served with whole wheat buns and butter/margarine, white milk (2% MF or less) and a milk pudding cup
- Grilled cheese sandwiches made with whole grain bread and block cheddar cheese served with carrot and pepper sticks
- Chili with a whole wheat bun, chocolate milk and cut-up raw vegetables and/or fresh fruit
- Pasta with tomato sauce, white milk (2% MF or less) and an applesauce cup
- Vegetable bean soup served with a whole wheat bagel and white milk (2% MF or less)

Ask students what they would like served on 'special food' days

Before making changes to your 'special food' day menus, ask for student and/or parent input through in-class surveys, at school assemblies and parent nights, or via the school newsletter. Also, remember to consider food allergies and the cultural needs and influences of your students prior to setting menus.



'The children will not eat pizza with whole wheat crust.'

Is it the children who won't eat it or the adults? You may be surprised, but often it's not the children we have to convince to choose whole wheat crust for their pizza, but their parents. Whole wheat crust has come a long way and there are many pizza companies that make an excellent, whole wheat crust that tastes better than white. Many schools have switched from white crust to whole wheat crust for 'special food' pizza days and children have not noticed a difference.

Does your school have a Healthy School Nutrition Environment?

A Healthy School Nutrition Environment exists when a school promotes healthy eating through words *and* actions. Students get the same message about food, nutrition and healthy eating wherever food is served – in the classroom, in the school and at home. The following nine Essential Elements¹ are recommended for a school to have a healthy nutrition environment.

Whole School Approach	Essential Elements
In the School	<p>Does your school offer healthy, reasonably priced and culturally-appropriate food choices? For example does your school have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healthy fundraising? • a school milk program? • a healthy tuck shop? • healthy 'special food' days? • non-food rewards in the classroom? • healthy classroom celebrations? • healthy refreshments at school meetings and events?
	Do parents, teachers and volunteers role model healthy eating and body image behaviours at school?
	Does your school have a Student Nutrition Program (eg, breakfast, snack and lunch)?
	Does your school practise safe food practices and have an allergy-safe environment?
	Are nutrition breaks at school appropriately scheduled?
	Does your school have a food and nutrition policy?
	In the Classroom
Do teachers have up-to-date nutrition resources to support the healthy eating expectations in the curriculum?	
In Homes and In the Community	Does your school provide student, parent and community education about healthy eating?

¹ Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health School Nutrition Workgroup. 2004 *Call to Action: Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment*.

Need more information?

Public health offers *Nutrition Tools for Schools - a toolkit for elementary schools*. Whether you're a teacher, parent, school administrator or volunteer, this toolkit will lead you through a step-by-step process to creating a healthy nutrition environment in your school. *Nutrition Tools for Schools* contains a variety of resources and tools to implement the nine Essential Elements listed above. For more information about this toolkit, please contact your public health unit/department.

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