

# School Meals are Healthy Meals

## Healthy Eating Patterns & Physical Activity

A large body of evidence shows that healthy eating patterns, along with regular physical activity, can help children and adults achieve and maintain good health and reduce the risk of chronic disease throughout all stages of life.<sup>1</sup>

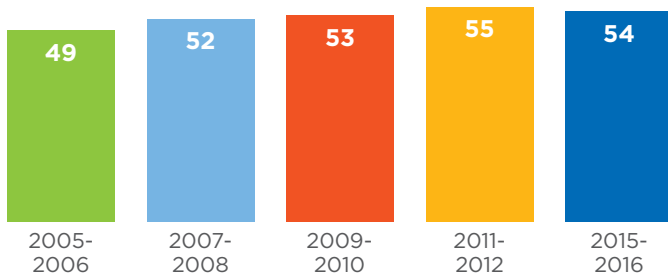
A measure of diet quality by age group indicates that average American diets do not conform to the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.<sup>2</sup>



## School Meals are a Vital Resource

The healthy eating index (HEI) is a measure of diet quality used to assess how well a set of foods aligns with key recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (on a scale from 0-100). The diet quality for children has improved over the years but children are still falling short of dietary recommendations.

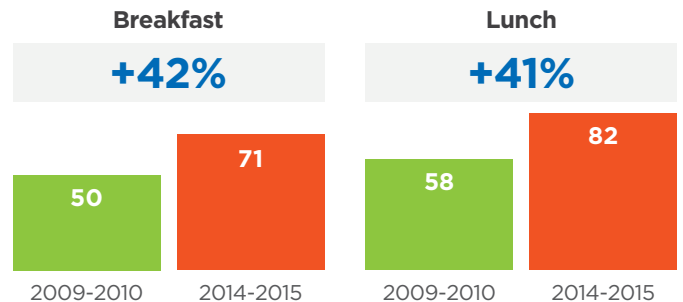
### HEI Scores for Children Ages 2-17 based on National Health and Nutrition Examination Study data<sup>2, 4-7</sup>



### Children can come closer to meeting the dietary recommendations by participating in school meals.

Between the 2009-2010 and 2014-2015 school year, the HEI score of school meals increased significantly<sup>3</sup>. The nutritional quality of school meals and their consistency with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans makes them a vital resource for our nation's children.

### HEI Scores for School Meals<sup>3</sup>



### Children who participate in school meals come closer to meeting dietary recommendations than non-participants.

An evaluation of U.S. research studies from 2010-2015 found that the nutrient content of elementary, middle and preschool packed lunches brought from home contained more calories, fat, saturated fat, desserts and sugar sweetened beverages than school lunches.<sup>8</sup>



### Call to Action: Help create awareness of the nutritional quality of school meals and encourage students to participate in school nutrition programs.



## References:

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. 9th Edition. December 2020. Available at [DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov).
- <sup>2</sup> [Average Healthy Eating Index-2015 Scores for Americans by Age Group, WWEIA/NHANES 2015-2016](#). Data source: National Center for Health Statistics, What We Eat in America/National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2015-2016. Healthy Eating Index-2015 Scores—U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion
- <sup>3</sup> Gearan EC, Fox MK. [Updated Nutrition Standards Have Significantly Improved the Nutritional Quality of School Lunches and Breakfasts](#). J Acad Nutr Diet. 2020 Mar;120(3):363-370.
- <sup>4</sup> [HEI-2010 Total and Component Scores for Children, Adults, and Older Adults, During 2005-2006](#). Data source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2005-2006
- <sup>5</sup> [HEI-2010 Total and Component Scores for Children, Adults, and Older Adults During 2007-2008](#). Data source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2007-2008
- <sup>6</sup> [HEI-2010 Total and Component Scores for Children, Adults, and Older Adults During 2009-2010](#). Data source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2009-2010
- <sup>7</sup> [HEI-2010 Total and Component Scores for Children, Adults, and Older Adults During 2011-2012](#). Data source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2011-2012
- <sup>8</sup> Minaya S, Rainville [A.J. How Nutritious are Children's Packed School Lunches? A Comparison of Lunches Brought from Home and School Lunches](#). The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management, Fall 2016; 40, 2.