

SUMMARY

Alexandria City Public Schools menus succeed in offering fresh fruit, diverse vegetables, and legumes during lunch, and meatless options are available at both breakfast and lunch. Moreover, plant-based options are available daily on junior high and high school menus. However, the menus as a whole fail to emphasize 100% whole grains, offer starchy vegetables at least twice per week, advertise non-dairy milk alternates, and restrict high-cholesterol foods like red meat and eggs. In addition, food service should strive to immediately remove all processed meats. While the lunch menus were successful in several important ways, the breakfast and lunch menus' weaknesses earn ACPS a "D".



STRENGTHS



Red-orange and dark green vegetables offered regularly



Fresh fruit offered daily



Legumes offered in some form daily



Meatless meals offered daily

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT



Immediately remove processed meat (chicken nuggets, hot dogs, bacon, pepperoni, lunch meat)



Restrict high-cholesterol foods like red meat and eggs



Serve water or plant-based milk options and restrict sugar-added varieties of all milk



Emphasize 100% whole grains, restrict ultra-processed products heavy in refined grains and sugars, and remove cookies and ice cream offered a la carte



Add portion sizes of all meats to the menu for increased transparency



Ensure all classes of vegetables are served twice per week



Offer fresh fruit daily at breakfast



Incorporate more plant-based proteins into breakfast and lunch menus, including a plant-based entree every day at lunch

BALANCING MENUS

Given that a significant and increasing proportion of children today show signs of metabolic syndrome, including high blood cholesterol, and diabetes or pre-diabetes, focusing menu reforms on three dietary components—saturated fat, cholesterol, and fiber—is a particularly high-impact way to improve food environments so that they will promote children's long-term health.

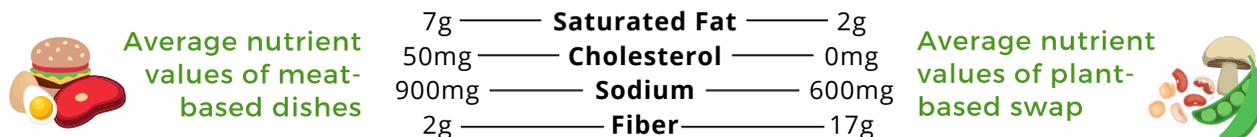
There is a robust causal link between saturated fat intake and elevated LDL cholesterol levels, a well-established marker for risk of heart disease and cardiovascular events. In addition to increasing risk for cardiovascular diseases, higher saturated fat intake is a significant risk factor for systemic inflammation, insulin resistance, and obesity.

Furthermore, the oxidation of dietary cholesterol, found only in animal products, poses significant potential health risks. Cholesterol oxidation products (COPs) are likely involved in both initiation and progression of chronic diseases, including atherosclerosis, neurodegenerative disease, kidney failure, and diabetes.

Regrettably, less than 3% of American children meet or exceed the minimum adequate intake of fiber per day, which may constitute the most widespread nutrient deficiency in the United States. This profound lack of dietary fiber—found in phytonutrient-rich, whole plant foods but not highly refined foods or animal products—combined with general overconsumption of saturated fats and cholesterol is a clear indicator of the imbalance of our food environments and the need for change.

ENHANCING HEALTHFULNESS

School districts like ACPS have improved the healthfulness of their menus by balancing their menus to feature more fresh, whole-food plant products and fewer meat and ultra-processed food products. An example of one simple change that accomplishes both is below. The following information assumes the serving size for each entree is 3 ounces. For a custom assessment, please contact us at menus@balanced.org.



Replacing one meat-based entree per week with a plant-based entree would:



Replacing one chocolate chip cookie dessert with 1/2 cup of strawberries would **eliminate**:

