



Balanced Menu REPORT CARD

SUMMARY

Montgomery County Public Schools menus succeed in offering diverse vegetable options each week and in offering daily meatless meals and legumes at higher grade levels. However, the menus fail to restrict high-cholesterol red meats, offer plant-based meal options, emphasize 100% whole grains, advertise non-dairy milks, and offer fresh fruit and legumes at all mealtimes and for all grades. In addition, processed meats should be removed from the menus, and the menus should be more transparent in listing all foods and beverages on offer. As a result, the menus at MCPS for the 2019-2020 year earn an "F" score.



STRENGTHS



Red-orange, dark green, and starchy vegetables offered regularly



Legumes offered daily at secondary school lunch



Warm, meatless meals offered daily



Red & processed meat offering restricted at Elementary breakfast

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT



Increase transparency of menu to include ingredients served and serving size



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



Diversify protein by replacing at least one entree per week with a plant-based protein



Restrict high-cholesterol foods like red meat and eggs



Emphasize 100% whole grains and restrict ultra-processed products heavy in refined grains and sugars



Offer legumes in some form every day to all grade levels



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



Provide warm, meatless options centered around plant proteins daily



Offer fresh fruit daily

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.

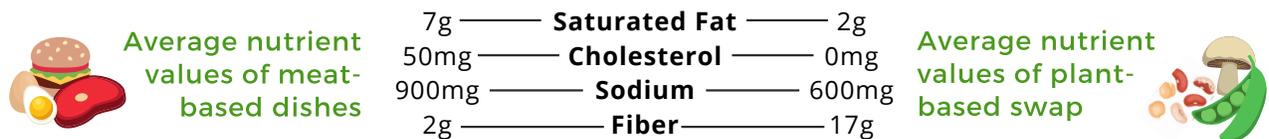
There is a robust causal link between saturated fat intake and elevated LDL cholesterol levels, a well-established marker for risk of heart disease and cardiovascular events. In addition to increasing risk for cardiovascular diseases, higher saturated fat intake is a significant risk factor for systemic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

