School Nutrition

Fewer than 1 in 10 Alaska high school students (8%) eat the recommended servings of fruit and vegetables each day.

Fueling Alaska's Students: The Importance of School Nutrition

Schools are a vital source of both nourishment and learning. By offering daily meals, schools provide nearly half of the daily caloric intake for many children in the United States. Nutrition education equips children with the knowledge and skills to make lifelong healthy food choices.

A growing body of research shows that a healthy diet can:

- Increase school attendance rates
- Boost academic performance, including higher grades, higher standardized test scores, and enhanced cognitive function
- Lower the risk of obesity, dental caries, iron deficiency anemia, and other chronic disease risk factors
- Improve classroom behavior (e.g., increased on-task focus)

Additionally, studies show that implementing a **universal school breakfast program** – where all students have access to free breakfast, regardless of their income – can reduce hunger and absenteeism while improving students' grade-point averages.

Ways to Engage Students

- Work with students to create new healthy breakfast and lunch options (e.g., recipe contests, taste testing)
- Display student artwork, promoting healthy food and beverages, in hallways, cafeteria, and bulletin boards throughout the school

Supportive Nutrition Policies

Nutritious eating during childhood and adolescence is essential for healthy growth and overall development—and schools play a critical role in this process. Schools can:

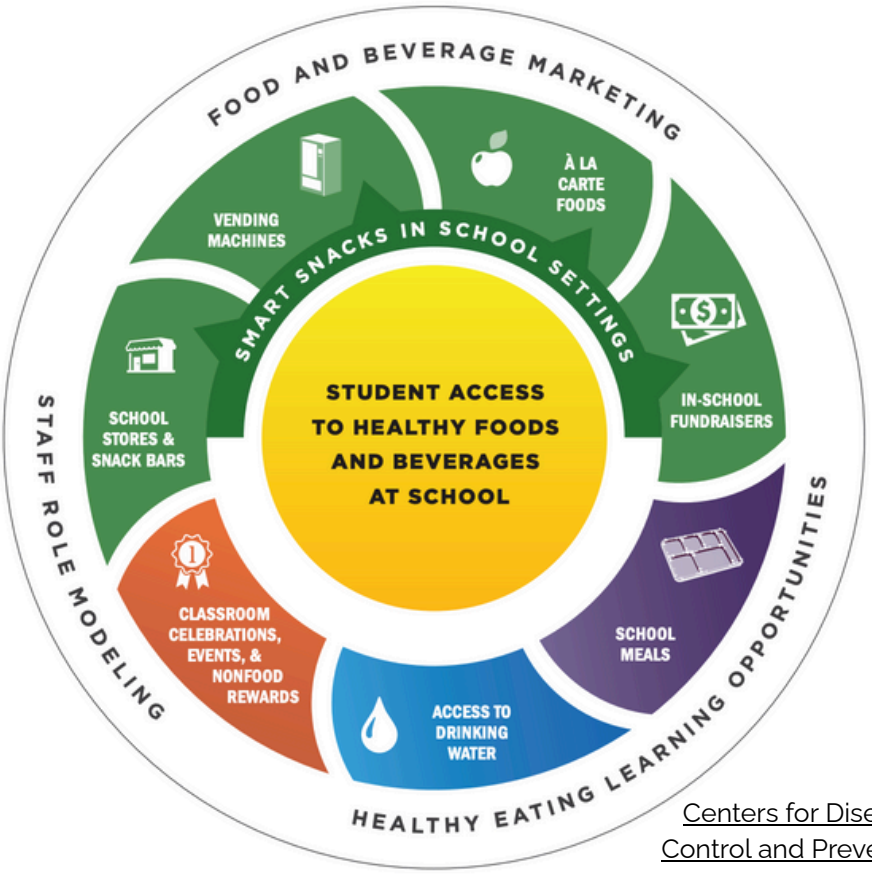
- Offer as many school meal programs as possible (breakfast and lunch, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, Afterschool Snack Program, Summer Food Service, etc.)
- Promote healthy fundraisers that sell non-food items or support physical activity (e.g., Walk-a-Thons)
- Provide recess before lunch - physical activity helps burn off energy, leading to better behavior, increased appetites, and less food waste

The Importance of a Local Wellness Policy

A Local School Wellness Policy (LWP) is a written plan that helps school districts promote healthy eating and physical activity for students. A strong school wellness policy promotes healthy eating and overall student well-being, but it must be continually communicated, assessed and updated. The State of Alaska has a **model school wellness policy** developed in partnership with the Departments of Health and Education and the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB).

The model policy includes an **Annual Report Checklist** to assist in transparency and reporting requirements. Tools like the Wellness School Assessment Tool (**WellSAT**) and the CDC's School Health Index (**SHI**) provide valuable resources to evaluate and enhance wellness policies. These tools help schools identify strengths and areas for improvement in their policies, ensuring they align with best practices and evidence-based guidelines. Schools can ensure that all aspects of the school environment—from meals to fundraisers—promote the health and success of students.

A well-crafted wellness policy supports nutrition programs and guides decisions on healthy snacks, fundraisers, classroom celebrations, and access to drinking water. A wellness policy can create a consistent environment that encourages healthy habits throughout the school day.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

School Breakfast By The Numbers

Serving school breakfast can reduce absenteeism, increase test scores and graduation rates and improve student health outcomes.

- **Universal breakfast** can reduce chronic absenteeism by up to **6%,** particularly in high-poverty schools.
- **Students who eat school breakfast** score up to **18% higher** on standardized math tests compared to those who skip breakfast.
- **Children from food-insecure households** who participate in school breakfast are **20% more likely to graduate high school.**
- **Eating school breakfast daily** is associated with better dietary quality and **lower rates of obesity** among children and adolescents.

SchoolNutrition.org

Alaska and National Data

Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)

The Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) monitors health behaviors through a survey completed by high school students. The information provided directly from high school students helps schools, communities, and organizations develop programs to improve teen health and address issues like dietary behaviors, physical activity, and mental health.

According to the 2023 YRBS survey:

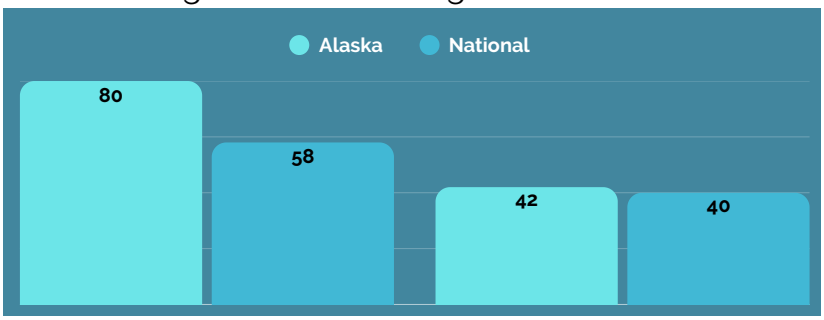
- 56% of Alaska high school youth consumed vegetables one or more times per day, showing a 6% decrease from the previous survey year.
- Only 11% of students ate the recommended three or more servings of vegetables per day.
- 9% of students did not consume any vegetables in the week leading up to the survey.
- 53% of students drank a soda, sports drink (such as Gatorade or PowerAde), energy drink (such as Red Bull, Rockstar, or Monster), or another sugar-sweetened beverage (such as lemonade, sweetened tea or coffee drinks, flavored milk, Snapple, or Sunny Delight) one or more times per day (during the past seven days)
- 14% of Alaska high school students drank a can, bottle, or glass of soda or pop two or more times per day

School Health Profiles

The School Health Profiles are a system of surveys administered by the CDC biennially to middle and high school principals and lead health education teachers. These surveys assess nationwide school health practices and practices.

Strengths

Alaska School Health Profile data show that schools exceed national averages in the following areas:



% of schools that did not sell less healthy foods and beverages (soda pop or fruit drinks, sports drinks, baked goods, salty snacks, candy) on campus

% of schools that served locally or regionally grown foods in the cafeteria or classrooms

Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System and CDC School Health Profiles

Traditional Foods in Schools

The **Alaska Food Code** allows the donation of many traditional wild game meat, seafood, plants, and other food to school nutrition programs with the exception of certain foods that are prohibited because of significant health hazards.

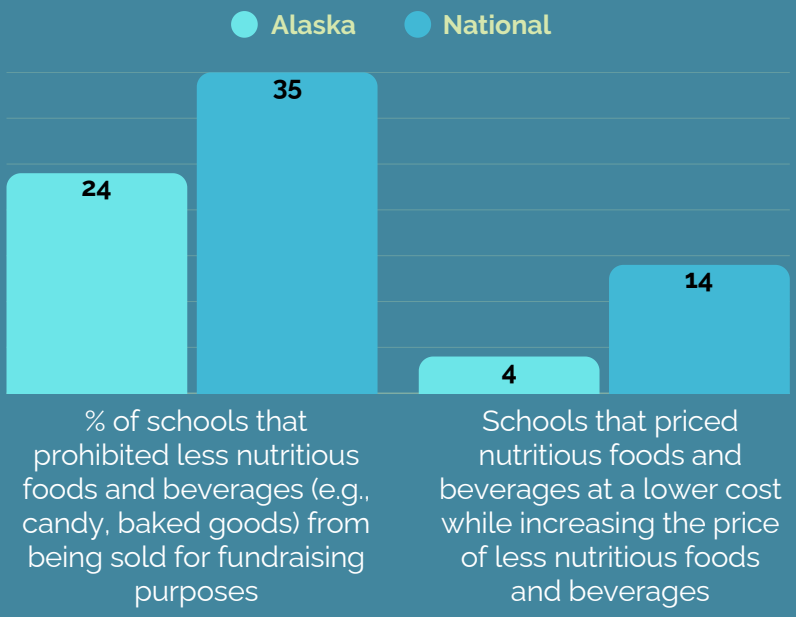
Incorporating local and traditional foods into school food service has multiple benefits. Donating food to school lunch programs can create bonds between community members, generations, and families. Hunting and foraging for local foods is a way to engage youth and Elders and pass on valuable knowledge about the world around us.

The Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) **Traditional Foods** site has a variety of helpful resources. **This flyer** describes which foods can and cannot be donated, food safety considerations, and a **receipt of donated game form** to facilitate donations. Multiple Alaska school districts have partnerships with fishermen for donated foods. This **Fish to Schools** video highlights the success of one Alaska school district partnering with local fishermen to bring healthy fish into their lunch program.

Alaska and National Data

School Health Profiles (cont.)

Opportunities for Growth
Alaska School Health Profile data shows that schools have lower percentages than the national averages in the following areas:



CDC School Health Profiles

Summary of Alaska Nutrition Environment and Services Data

School-Based Nutrition Strategies:

- 38% of schools always or almost always offer fruit or non-fried vegetables at school celebrations when foods and beverages are offered
- 41% of schools provided information to students or families on the nutrition and caloric content of foods available
- 31% planted a school food or vegetable garden

Local Wellness Policy:

- 53% of schools reviewed their district's wellness policy in the last year
- 52% communicated to school staff about the wellness policy
- 43% communicated to parents and families about the wellness policy
- 39% measured their school's compliance with the district's wellness policy

Advertising and Promotion:

- 66% prohibit advertisements of foods that don't meet Smart Snacks nutrition requirements in school buildings
- 65% prohibit advertisements on school grounds including on the outside of the school building, on playing fields, or other areas of the campus

Competitive Foods:

- 7% of schools allowed students to purchase chocolate candy
- 8% allowed students to purchase other kinds of candy
- 11% of schools allowed students to purchase salty snacks that are not low in fat (e.g., regular potato chips)

Nutrition and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model

Ways the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child components can support nutrition environment & services in your school:

Health Education

- Provide training for people who provide nutrition education, and promote collaboration between nutrition services staff and teachers to reinforce nutrition education lessons taught in the classroom (e.g., nutrition services staff can provide food and ideas for nutrition education lessons and use the cafeteria for classes)
- In a health education curriculum, address the importance of water consumption, eating breakfast, deceptive food marketing, and how to resist peer pressure related to unhealthy dietary behavior

Physical Environment

- Provide students with a clean, safe, and pleasant cafeteria and access to a free source of drinking water in or right outside the cafeteria and gymnasium, other indoor physical activity facilities, and hallways throughout the school
- Install water bottle filling stations to support access to clean, good tasting water throughout the day
- Market messages for nutritious food and beverages on the exteriors of vending machines, food or beverage cups or

Health Services

- Develop a Food Allergy Management and Prevention Plan, and collaborate with health services staff to provide appropriate meals to students with allergies and other special dietary and health care needs
- Provide nutrition information for health services staff to share with students and families
- Create materials and educate students and parents about the link between good nutrition and diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and other diet-related conditions

Family Engagement

- Provide opportunities for families to eat breakfast and lunch with children at school, and provide feedback on the experience and food provided
- Assist families with submitting free/reduced priced meals applications
- Include nutrition education resources for families (recipes, meal planning, grocery shopping, and portion sizes) in the school newsletter
- Work with local organizations (e.g., Food Bank of Alaska) to assess food insecurity for students and utilize resources to address food gaps
- Develop a culture of healthy celebrations (ie. extra recess, dance parties, principal for a day) and encourage non-food focused fundraising (i.e. walk-a-thon, craft raffles)

National Resources

Action for Healthy Kids, NourishEd:

NourishEd is a comprehensive resource from Action for Healthy Kids designed to help schools and communities improve nutrition and increase food access for all children. From school meals and snacks to nutrition education and family engagement, Nourished offers practical tools, strategies, and success stories to support whole child wellness through better nutrition.

Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Nutrition Services:

Alliance for a Healthier Generation offers tools and guidance to help schools serve nutritious meals and foster a healthy food environment. Their Nutrition Services resources support menu planning, smart snack implementation, and strategies to engage students and families in healthy eating.

School Nutrition (CDC):

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website includes information for the public on school nutrition, nutrition education, water access in schools and more, including the Comprehensive Framework for Addressing the School Nutrition Environment and Services

USDA, National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs:

The USDA's School Lunch and Breakfast Programs ensure children receive nutritious, balanced meals during the school day. These federally assisted meal programs set nutrition standards and support schools in promoting student health and learning.

Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) School Wellness Policy:

CSPI provides evidence-based resources to help schools develop, strengthen, and implement wellness policies. Their toolkit includes model language, best practices, and guidance to align with federal requirements and promote healthy school environments.

USDA Team Nutrition:

Team Nutrition supports child nutrition professionals and educators with resources, training, and materials that promote healthy eating and physical activity. Their goal is to improve the health of children through nutrition education and school meal enhancements.

Local and Culturally Relevant Resources

The following resources are unique to the state of Alaska and can play a role in promoting Alaska Native heritage. They not only enhance physical well-being but also connect students with traditional practices and the rich indigenous traditions of Alaska's culture.

Alaska Child Nutrition Programs:
within the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development works to help ensure students are fed and ready to learn. Their website provides information and contacts for participating in a variety of school meal programs (school lunch, breakfast, afterschool snacks, fruit and vegetable program, special milk program) as well as information on grants and resources like the Alaska Farm to School Program.

Alaska School Nutrition Association:
is a non profit organization that has been advancing the availability, quality and acceptance of school nutrition programs as an integral part of education for decades. They provide an annual conference and ongoing trainings and resources for school nutrition professionals.

Sitka Conservation Society's Fish to School Program and Stream to Plate Curriculum:
link nutrition education to Alaska's vibrant fisheries.

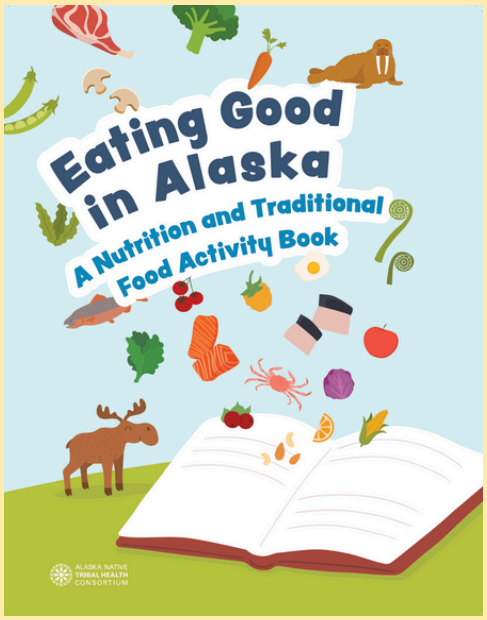
Alaska Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) Program:
through the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension. The SNAP-Ed program provides evidenced-based nutrition education classes that are aligned with policy, systems and environmental change strategies to create long lasting community change. In person classes are available in some regions and statewide communication materials through Every Bite Counts.

Play Every Day Sugary Drinks Campaign:
Play Every Day is run through the Alaska Physical Activity and Nutrition program. Its long-term goal is to support more children to grow up at a healthy weight. Play Every Day messages and related efforts focus on encouraging two actions that help children grow up healthy: getting daily physical activity that improves the health of the body and mind and serving healthy drinks like water or plain milk instead of sugary drinks.

Alaska Native Recipe Books and Videos:

Incorporating cultural practices and values into nutrition education promotes adherence to healthy habits. Aligning educational programs with people's cultural values and traditions can lead to better long-term health outcomes.

- ANTHC's **Store Outside Your Door** webisodes feature cooking and gathering subsistence food across the state of Alaska
- **Tundra to Table** This cooking series is designed to celebrate the benefits of wild, Alaskan superfoods. The series demonstrates how to make simple, healthy dishes using ingredients that are readily available in villages, both from the tundra and the store
- SouthCentral Foundation's **Traditional Food Recipes** provide nutrition facts and preparation techniques for a variety of local foods
- ANTHC Cancer Prevention Program's new **Traditional Food Guide/Eating Good in Alaska** activity book has hands-on nutrition education activities geared towards 4th-6th grade. Copies are available free for distribution, email **cancer@anthc.org**
- ANTHC Whole Grain adventures videos are geared towards younger students with Molly of Denali style animation
- ANTHC **My Alaska Plate placemats** 'Alaskan-ize' the classic My Plate nutritional education tool with local wild fish and game and berries, as well as canned/frozen foods common to rural Alaskan pantries
- The Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association (APIA') **Head Start Traditional Food for Preschoolers Curriculum** is a rich resource with beautiful activity books, posters and audio files to hear how to pronounce some of the words of traditional foods in local languages of the region



ANTHC's Got Neqpiaq? Curriculum:

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) partnered with Head Start preschool programs administered by Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP) to create a nutrition and physical activity curriculum culturally specific to preschool-age children in the Yukon Kuskokwim region.

This curriculum is classified as Indigenous Knowledge and as such is the intellectual property of the Alaska Native community members who shared their values, traditions, and knowledge in creating it. We ask that you acknowledge its origins in any use of the curriculum or subsequent adaptations. We do not allow any financial profit to be made from the dissemination of this curriculum or any adaptation thereof.

Recommended citation: *Got Neqpiaq?* Created by Elders, parents, and teachers in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta of Alaska, and by dieticians and researchers at ANTHC and RurAL CAP.

References:

- Sliwa SA, Merlo CL, McKinnon II, et al. Skipping Breakfast and Academic Grades, Persistent Feelings of Sadness or Hopelessness, and School Connectedness Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2023. MMWR Suppl 2024;73(Suppl-4):87–93. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7304a10
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