The Case for Healthy Foods

Efforts to introduce healthier school foods are sometimes met with resistance. Below are some common arguments that are presented, along with discussion points supporting change.

“**These foods are being offered as a treat.**”
Healthy foods have become the exception rather than the norm in many situations. Foods with low nutrient value have become a large part of many children’s diets, accounting for about *one third* of average calorie intakes. At these levels, the nutritious foods that children need for health, growth and optimal school performance are being squeezed out. Children learn to prefer foods associated with fun social occasions. School events offer a valuable opportunity to model the enjoyment of healthy foods. When unhealthy foods are used as treats or rewards, it makes these foods more desirable. Serving healthy foods at special occasions can help to promote a mindset where healthy foods are viewed as treats. Fresh berries, watermelon and corn on the cob are examples of foods that are very popular when served at special events.

“Our school depends on soft drink sales to raise money.”
When fundraising efforts are undertaken on behalf of children, these activities should support their *overall well being* and should not detract from their nutritional health. Experiences in a number of schools have shown that students will purchase healthy foods when they are offered, particularly if these foods are not competing with unhealthy choices. Non-food fund-raisers are also a viable option.

“As a society, we spend far more on diet-related health-care costs than non-profit organizations can ever raise from selling soft drinks and potato chips.”

“If unhealthy foods aren’t offered in school, students will just buy them outside of school.”
Many unhealthy choices are available outside the school walls. Schools have a responsibility to ensure a healthy environment. Schools that have offered healthy food choices have found a reduction in the number of students bringing in unhealthy foods purchased outside of school.

“It is up to students to make healthy choices.”
It is unrealistic to expect most children to regularly make healthier choices when they are routinely faced with a myriad of unhealthy choices. Heavy marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods in our society creates an unlevel playing field. In some situations, very few, if any, healthy choices are offered. Peer pressure is a significant factor in children’s food choices at school. It can be very beneficial to offer children choices in a variety of areas, from recess activities to food selection. However, it is always important to ensure that they are given the opportunity to make choices from *among healthy options.*
“It is up to parents to teach their children to make healthy choices.”
Children spend a significant portion of their day at school and may consume up to 1/3 of their daily calories there. Many factors can make this challenging for parents. Peer pressure, as well as the advertising, marketing and availability of foods of poor nutritional quality in our society can compete with parent’s efforts to instill healthy eating habits in their children. Schools need to support parents by offering healthy choices.
A healthy school food policy can serve to remind and educate parents about the role of nutrition in children’s health, well being and learning potential. Children are taught the principles of healthy eating as part of the curriculum. It is important that the school environment supports and reinforces this learning by providing and promoting nutritious choices whenever food is offered. Unhealthy choices contradict classroom nutrition teaching.

“Students will not buy or eat nutritious foods.”
Schools that provide healthy choices have found that students do buy and eat nutritious foods when they are offered. This is especially true when the healthier choices are not competing with unhealthy choices that have come to be seen as more desirable in our society. For example, children will happily eat a fruit or vegetable platter at a classroom party, but the healthy choices may go untouched if doughnuts are also offered.

“These foods won’t harm them.”
A majority of Canadian children do not eat nutritionally balanced or adequate diets. Children’s nutritional health is declining. There has been a sharp increase in childhood obesity and other nutrition-related conditions in recent years. Current trends in the prevalence of diet-related health conditions are placing a rapidly growing strain on our health care system as well as the health of individuals. Poor nutrition decreases the learning potential of students.
Junk Foods in Schools Challenges Healthy Eating

Did you know that what your children eat at school can affect what they eat at home? There are many factors that affect what children eat and why, including taste, family, friends and advertising. Since children spend about 1000 hours in school a year, the school environment can have a large impact on food choices. In a recent survey by Dietitians of Canada, parents reported that increased access to high fat and high sugar foods, and limited access to healthy foods were challenges to eating healthy in schools.

Although nutrient needs are high in childhood, many children have diets that are not well balanced and lack certain nutrients. They tend to eat few vegetables, fruit and milk products and eat many foods high in fat and sugar. Diets high in fat and sugar, combined with lower levels of physical activity, put children at risk for health problems, such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes.

Over the years, the sale of "junk food" products within schools has become the norm. In many schools, vending machines line the hallways, fast foods are being served as hot meals and soft drinks are being offered in canteens. Although some parents and schools are taking a stand against "junk food" in schools, more can be done to promote "nutrition friendly" schools. What can parents do?

- Be a role model for your children. Promote healthy eating at home and teach children to eat well-balanced meals by example. Your children may have a positive impact on their peers at school.
- Involve your children in planning school lunches and snacks. Children may be more willing to eat food they make.
- Ask school staff to allow snack time and send one or two healthy portable lunch or snack items with your children. Children may have little time to eat during lunch hour and could eat these snacks at other times throughout the day.
- Avoid or limit sending money with your children. There may not be many healthy foods for sale in their school.
- Advocate for school nutrition standards within your school.

Currently in Saskatchewan there is no provincial policy regarding school nutrition. However, the Public Health Nutritionists have developed guidelines with the Saskatchewan School Boards Association (available at http://www.saskschoolboards.ca). The guidelines can be used as a resource for developing nutrition standards in schools. Ask your local public health nutritionist for more information on these guidelines and resources available for promoting a nutritious school environment.

WRITTEN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS OF SASKATCHEWAN, September 12, 2004. For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at ____________.
Healthy School Environments

Students spend about 25% of their day in school. The impact of the school environment on health and school performance is significant and should not go unrecognized. Selling less nutritious food items (e.g. chips, doughnuts, pop) or reducing physical education can compromise children's performance in school. Maintaining a healthy school environment is worthwhile and does not have to cost a lot of money.

Healthy Food Choices
Proper nutrition is crucial for optimum brain development and functioning. School performance and overall health can be negatively affected if children do not eat adequate amounts of nutritious food. Making healthy food choices available in school helps students meet their nutritional needs. This also gives them a chance to apply the nutrition information taught in the classroom.

Healthier food choices, such as trail mix, pudding or canned fruit cups, can be offered in school canteens or vending machines. Healthy drink choices include milk, real juice or water. Milk can be offered through the Saskatchewan Dairy Foundation School Milk Program. If some students are regularly coming to school hungry, food and nutrition programs for breakfast, lunch and snacks can be offered on site.

Fundraising programs give schools and communities another chance to practice and support healthy habits. Selling soup or chili for lunch on special days or canvassing for walk-a-thons instead of selling chocolates are just a few options.

Access to healthy food and drink is only one part of a healthy environment. Allowing adequate time for children to eat these foods is also important. Some schools only allow 15 to 20 minutes for lunch which may not give students enough time to eat, socialize and enjoy their food. When possible, schools should provide students with at least 30 minutes to eat before asking them to go outside.

Physical Activity
Many children today are inactive. Schools have a chance to influence activity levels by preserving physical education classes and promoting "active" recess breaks. Physical activity can improve concentration, school performance and behaviour in the classroom. If gym time is not available, students and teachers can perform on-the-spot activities in their classroom a few times a day. Some schools also offer noon-hour walking programs, intramural and after school sports. The key is to provide regular opportunities for all children to participate in activities at their own level.

Investing in a child's health at an early age can have life-long benefits. Healthy school environments give children the chance to develop to their fullest potential. It also allows children to practice the life skills learned in the classroom.

For more information on creating a healthy environment at your school, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist.

For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at __________________.
Foods in Schools

Has nutrition become a “policy” at your school? A school food policy provides a set of guidelines for foods sold and served in schools. It supports the principles of healthy eating taught in the classroom. Nutritious food choices can be promoted in canteens, cafeterias and classrooms.

The Saskatchewan School Boards Association (SSBA) has released a “research paper” on Nutrition guidelines for schools. It is intended to serve as a resource for school boards when developing policies regarding nutrition in schools. The SSBA is to be congratulated for recognizing that school boards have an obligation to ensure that nutrition policies are consistent with classroom teaching.

Schools play a major role in helping young people to become healthy adults and to live healthier, longer and more satisfying and productive lives. Canteen cafeteria and classroom food choices that support healthy choices not only benefit the student’s athletic and academic performance, but they are consistent with the classroom message.

Young people cannot learn from theory alone. They must have the opportunity to practice what they learn in a setting that includes regular access to a variety of healthy food choices including some vegetables, fruit and grain products. Schools which sell only chips, pop, chocolate bars, candy and hot dogs during school events are not providing their students with the opportunity to make healthy choices.

Choice is the key issue. Students need not be forbidden to eat less nutritious foods, but should be guaranteed the opportunity to make healthy choices when they desire. Ideally, the more healthy choices would be plentiful, reasonably priced, and marketed in the same way as the less nutritious choices.

There are no good or bad foods, only more or less healthy eating habits. All foods can fit into an overall healthy diet. However, the emphasis should be to meet the suggested serving guidelines from the four food groups of Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating rather than choosing foods mainly from the ‘Others’ group.

A school food policy recognizes that the school environment should be one where healthy eating is considered normal, and where it is both modeled and reinforced.

Whether you are part of a community group, a student or an interested citizen, you can help to promote good nutrition in schools. For specific guidelines or more information on how you can get involved in a food policy for your school, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist for assistance. Together we can support healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime!

WRITTEN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS OF SASKATCHEWAN, September, 2005
(Adapted from October, 1996)
For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at __________________.
Is nutrition a “policy” at your school? What is a **School Food Policy**? A school food policy provides a guideline set for foods sold and served in schools. It supports the principles of healthy eating taught in the classroom. Nutritious food choices can be promoted in canteens, cafeterias and classrooms.

A school policy is individual to the school. Students, parents, staff and health educators can work together to make a policy for their school. The policy may also make certain that nutrition is part of health education. The key is that students are provided with healthy food choices. It may be as simple as ensuring that fruit is always available in the canteen or that fruit juice is served on class outings rather than pop, or it may be more complex such as outlining a menu.

Any sort of guideline always provides room for discussion. Differing opinions may exist. For example, some people may make the following statements while others believe in the reasoning found in the response.

**“Students have the right to choose whatever they want”**
Yes, but schools have a responsibility to teach students to make wise choices. A choice is not always offered in the market place. Nutritious foods are too rarely made available and seldom promoted.

**“They’ll buy it down the street anyway.”**
Applying the same logic, schools could justify the sale of cigarettes and alcohol. Providing nutritious food choices makes good health sense. It delivers a message consistent with nutrition theory taught in school.

**“The profit is used to fund student programs.”**
This is a contradiction, not a defense. Athletic programs encourage fitness. But fitness can’t be achieved on a diet high in sugar, fat and salt. Can profits be justified at the expense of children’s health?

**“There is no profit in nutritious foods because students won’t buy them.”**
Simply not true. This old argument has been proven wrong time and time again in schools. Good marketing technique and teenager’s interest in looking good and being fit are a winning combination.

Whether you are part of a parent group, a student yourself or an interested citizen, you can help promote good nutrition in schools. For specific guidelines or more information on how you can get involved in a food policy for your school, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist for assistance. Together we can support healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime!

**WRITTEN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS OF SASKATCHEWAN, September, 2005**
(Adapted from October, 1995)
For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at _______________.
Food and Fundraising

Fundraising is used to support many valuable activities in our communities. Sports, recreation, social service and health-related organizations often raise funds to pay for all or part of what they do. These organizations contribute to the wellbeing of many in our society.

Selling food has become a common way to raise funds. Unfortunately, the types of foods sold are often unhealthy. Student groups at school often sell doughnuts, soft drinks or chips to fellow students. Candies is often sold door to door. A sports day concession usually sells french fries and hot dogs. While the funds raised go toward good causes, these types of foods do not promote the health and wellness of community members.

Less healthy foods are often considered to be "treats" and they can fit in to a healthy diet if they are eaten only occasionally. The reality however, is that low nutrient, high-energy foods have become a regular part of the diets of most people.

Lifestyle-related health conditions affect many Canadians. Rates of obesity and diabetes have risen dramatically in both adults and children. Making healthy choices, common, routine and easy in our society are important steps in preventing ill health and rising health care costs. Healthy fund-raisers are one of the ways that we can promote good lifestyle choices.

Selecting a healthy fundraiser is particularly important when children are involved. Children learn by example. When unhealthy foods are sold and promoted, it makes these foods seem more desirable.

Many schools have begun to move away from the typical fundraising activities of the past. These schools recognize the importance of the school food environment. Focusing on healthy foods whenever food is sold supports the health and learning potential of students. Healthy foods at school reinforce, rather than contradict, nutrition education in the classroom. As well, the foods served or sold at school influence students’ ideas about food and the choices that they make outside of school.

There are many alternatives to selling unhealthy foods. Many groups have had great success with healthier food choices. Cases of fruit can be sold door to door. Concessions can feature corn on the cob or watermelon. A colorful fruit basket can be offered as a raffle prize. There are also many options for fundraising activities that do not involve the sale of food.

Your local Public Health Nutritionist can provide ideas for healthy fundraisers. If your organization is serving food, contact your local Public Health Inspector regarding food safety and inspection requirements.

By choosing healthy fundraising activities, organizations can ensure that they are helping to support the overall well being of our community as well as their specific cause. In doing so, these organizations are showing leadership and community responsibility.

WRITTEN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS OF SASKATCHEWAN, January 30, 2005. For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at __________________.
Food Marketing to Children

The marketing of foods has a large impact on the food choices made each day. Food marketers like to reach children and youth because they influence their parents’ purchases and because they are future shoppers. The goal is to make children and youth buyers of a product for many years. Sadly, one study reported that only 4% of food advertisements shown during children's viewing time are for healthy foods.

Food marketing aimed at children goes beyond television ads and includes marketing in schools, placing food products on TV shows and movies, kids clubs, the Internet and toys with brand logos. This leads children to see to the product often and therefore to desire the food more.

Exposing children to food products carries on into schools. Direct product selling occurs through vending machines and canteens. Schools may sign contracts with companies to sell their brands only. Marketing also occurs through sponsored education programs, sports programs, contests and coupons.

Another approach to getting people to buy more of a product is through what is called “value marketing”. This is when companies offer more food or drink for an additional small amount of money or by offering a whole meal package instead of single items. This appears to be a bargain money-wise, but often the foods that are offered are low in nutrients and high in sugar and/or fat.

Here are some ideas to combat the pressures of food marketing:
Expose children to healthy foods often. Keep a fruit bowl on the kitchen counter and cut-up vegetables in the fridge.
- Limit the amounts of non-nutritious foods you buy.
- Teach kids about advertising techniques. The webite www.media-awareness.ca can show you how.
- At fast food restaurants, think about what nutrients you are getting for the money instead of just the amount of food for your money. For example, it would it better to buy milk instead of a soft drink to complete a meal at a fast food restaurant.
- Teach kids to drink water for thirst.
- Limit the amount of time watching TV. This not only limits exposure to advertising but also encourages kids to be physically active.
- Work with your school to make sure children’s health is being considered when serving and selling foods, such as on sports days and for fundraisers.
- As a consumer, ask for what you want when eating out. Make it known that you want an amount of food you can finish without overeating - at a fair and reasonable price.

For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at __________________.
Advertising in the Classroom

Generally speaking, today's children have more money to spend than ever before. Companies know this and find that advertising in schools, a place where students spend about six hours a day, 200 days a year, makes good business sense. Marketing to children creates "brand loyalty" in these consumers who have years of spending ahead of them.

A growing number of companies are offering schools money or equipment for a chance to market their products directly to students. As budgets shrink, schools must find ways to get extra funding. Signing contracts with these companies seems like an easy way to get the money they need.

How much advertising is going on in your school? Advertising is done in many ways - some methods are obvious, others are subtle. Look for the following:

1. In-school advertisements - company logos are evident throughout the school in places such as billboards, score clocks, soft drink machines, book covers, sports uniforms or banners at sponsored school events.
2. "Exclusive rights" contracts - a company gives money to schools that carry ONLY their product(s). Extra money may also be given if sales exceed a certain quota.
3. Corporate-sponsored educational materials - includes videos, books, software or activity sheets used in the classroom.
4. Contests and incentive programs - students compete for prizes by selling, buying or collecting labels for a certain product.
5. Advertising in the classroom - "Channel One" is an extreme example. Grade 6-12 students are required to watch a 12 minute news broadcast plus 2 minutes of commercials every day. The school receives access to televisions, VCRs and satellite dishes if they participate.

Many people are opposed to advertising in schools. They feel that youth are being exploited for profit because school children are a captive audience. They see it as promoting materialism and competition between students and families. Corporate promotions can be biased, and giving them out implies that the school endorses the product. Promoting certain products may contradict information, such as health information, being taught in the classroom.

Groups that support such advertising feel this is the only way to provide schools with greatly needed money and more up-to-date materials. They feel it gives teachers a chance to teach about media literacy as well.

Is there any way to balance the goals and purpose of education with the search for new sources of funding? Each school, school division, parent advisory group and community needs to decide what amount and type of advertising in their schools is acceptable. Schools may choose to make their school "ad-free," require that all corporate-labeled material go through a strict review process, or pursue funding that has "no strings attached." They may also want to educate children on media literacy or lobby the government to increase funding in the schools.

For more information on this topic go to the Consumers Union website at http://www.consumersunion.org/ or contact your local Public Health Nutritionist.

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Politics of Food

What makes you choose the foods that you do? Is it taste? Cost? Advertising? Food is big business, generating $900 billion in sales each year. To produce higher profits, companies cleverly market their products to get you to eat more of their food item. Sadly, profit, not health or nutrition is the motivator.

You may be unaware of how the food industry tries to impact your food choices. Here are a few of their strategies:

More choices - The more choices people have, the more they usually eat. There are over 100,000 packaged foods available on the market and on average 24,000 are offered in your local grocery store. About 10,000 new foods are introduced each year, mostly in the form of candy, snacks, soft drinks and other foods with limited nutritional value. Companies pay a lot of money for prime shelf space in the grocery store to get you to buy their product. Making a variety of foods available at every gas station and corner store is another way to get people to eat more.

Super-sized portions - People eat more when they are served larger portions of food. Restaurants entice you to eat more by serving bigger portions and selling a burger, fries and drink for a "value" price. Some places may even charge less for the "combo" than if you had purchased the items separately.

Advertising - You can't watch television or pick up a magazine without being bombarded with food ads. Many of these food ads are for processed or fast food. In the United States, McDonalds spends $1 billion per year marketing their product. Nationally advertised soft drink companies spend $100 million on marketing. Maybe that is why you crave a burger and pop, and not broccoli.

Schools are a great place to advertise because children are a "captive audience". By advertising and making their brand available to younger people, companies can create a lifetime loyalty to their product. One way of doing this is by having schools sign exclusive contracts to sell a certain brand. In return, schools receive benefits such as sports equipment or computers.

Educational materials - Many food companies produce educational brochures or lessons plans and offer them free-of-charge to health professionals or schools. Food companies also sponsor conferences for health professionals. Be aware of these biases.
The concern is not so much the politics of food but the consequences. Obesity rates, diabetes, heart disease and other conditions are a product of an "eat more, do less" society. Health professionals are often fighting a losing battle to get people to be more physically active and to make more nutritious choices. Food companies, with very large advertising budgets, are trying to convince the consumer to do just the opposite.

So what can we do about the politics of food? Be aware of how food companies may be influencing your decisions. Ask restaurants to serve half portions and to share nutrition information with their customers. Choose not to super-size and limit your exposure to food ads by watching less television and being more active. This will allow you to make decisions that are more informed, and hopefully, healthier.

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For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at __________________.
Nutrition and Public Policy: How do they relate?

Eating healthy is simple. All we have to do is follow Canada’s Food Guide to Healthy Eating. True or false? This is true to a certain extent, but there are many things that can affect our food choices. Some of these factors include income, social status, living and working conditions, schooling, the safety of the food supply and how we are able to deal with life's challenges. Healthy eating may not be so simple after all!

We can promote healthy eating by helping to build healthy public policies. So what is a "healthy" public policy? It is a principle or a course of action that will affect the general public. Healthy public policies attempt to improve the health of the public. They also try to make sure that all people have equal opportunities. Some healthy public policies can help create a climate that supports healthy living and healthy eating.

What are some healthy public policies that promote healthy living and eating? A public place, such as a mall, that has a breastfeeding friendly policy is one example. This policy helps women feel at ease about breastfeeding away from home. It also promotes the health and growth of children by encouraging breastfeeding. Not only that, but it is good business for the mall owners!

Another example is the laws and guidelines that are in place to ensure the safety of our food. These may be set up by government groups, and/or those who produce, process, sell and buy food. For instance, "best before" dates on perishable foods help us choose products that are fresh and safe.

A final example is a government policy that supports minimum wages that will give people enough money to buy healthy foods. Knowing how to eat healthy is only helpful if you can afford the food!

In order to build healthy public policies we need to think about how current and future policies can affect our health. We must then support them so they can be maintained.

Members of the community can work as a team to decide where a policy can impact people’s health and well being. For instance, people can have an effect on the types of food offered in public places like hockey rinks and schools. They can promote guidelines that will assure that food is made safely and that healthy choices are present. They can also provide facts that show the benefits of adopting a given policy.

In order to build healthy public policies, we all need to work with each other to support, plan, implement and maintain policies for our own communities

For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at __________________.
Healthy Food Choices: A Community Responsibility

Making healthy food choices is a matter of personal choice . . . right? Individually, we make daily decisions about the food we eat. Having the desire, facts, and practical skills to choose healthy foods helps us to make the best decisions. These are important, but there are many things that impact our decision-making. These include:

- The types of foods in our grocery stores, work places, schools, recreational facilities, and restaurants
- The quality of foods available and information on food labels
- Having enough money to buy nutritious foods
- Access to education about food and nutrition

Healthy public policy has the ability to influence all the above factors. Policies provide guidelines for making decisions. They set guidelines for government, schools, and other organizations to provide the "greatest good for the greatest number". Healthy public policy can influence our everyday food choices and make it easier to make the best decisions.

Healthy public policy is not only the duty of people involved in health care. Policies that involve housing, the environment, social welfare, energy, and agriculture directly affect health. For example, agriculture policy affects the price we pay for foods in the grocery store.

Healthy nutrition policies protect the health of all people by ensuring access to food that is personally acceptable, affordable, and safe. Examples of healthy nutrition policies include:

- The availability of nutritious food choices in the work site, schools and recreational facilities since we often spend many hours a day at these places
- Guidelines for foods served in childcare facilities and schools
- Adoption of the World Health Organization's Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes in hospitals to protect and promote breastfeeding by eliminating the promotion of breastmilk substitutes
- Adoption in principle of a Food Charter by Saskatoon and Prince Albert city councils
- Regulation of the development of new foods to ensure safety
- Ensuring there are food programs in schools for hungry children
- Canada's Food Guide To Healthy Eating, which outlines the basics of healthy eating
- The availability of nutrition services in health and community agencies

Setting policy involves arriving at a balance between science and the values, needs, concerns and financial realities of all those affected by policy. Community input and action is key to the development of healthy public policy.

Making wise food choices is an important personal responsibility, which is influenced by the community around us. As citizens, we need to be aware of what influences our food choices and bring these issues to the attention of those who make the decisions. What issues need action in your community?

WRITTEN BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS OF SASKATCHEWAN, October 12, 2003. For more information, contact your local Public Health Nutritionist at ________________.
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Background on Foods In Schools

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