

20 TRUTH-BOMBS FOR DEBUNKING SCHOOL LUNCH CRITICISMS

Uncover the real “why” behind the NSLP’s quirky rules.

July 14, 2026
11:15 am

Melissa Manning
CEO and Founder
My School RD



Speaker

Melissa Manning

CEO & Founder, My School RD



Disclosures & Affiliations

Melissa Manning

CEO & Founder

My School RD

- 50+ School Districts
- Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
- Chef Ann Foundation
- LunchAssist
- The Lunchmaster
- Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN)

Why I show up.

I show up because of the people I work with, who lead with integrity, grit, and purpose.

I show up so students can focus on learning instead of hunger.

I show up because a meal can offer dignity, belonging, and sometimes, it feeds a lonely child's heart, as well.



Today's Session

Why can't we offer oat milk?

Why isn't there a protein requirement for breakfast?

Why are green beans and green peas not in the Beans subgroup?

Join this session to uncover the real “why” behind the NSLP’s quirky rules. Forget the mystery meat myth - today’s school lunches focus on recognizable foods, transparency, and nutrient integrity, balancing calories, sugar, and budgets with skill. We’ll connect the dots between a child’s nutritional needs for growth and learning and NSLP policy. With just a few communication strategies and underlying nutrition concepts, you can answer these questions, too, without having to be a dietitian.

Agenda

- Commonly Asked Questions
- Meat and Meat Alternates
- Grains
- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Milk
- Audits and Production Sheets
- Communication Strategies



Response Framework:

1. Listen first
2. Find common ground
3. Educate and Collaborate
4. Channel Their Energy into Action



What are some hard questions you are asked?



How do you explain the answers?

Nutrition



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1. School lunches are too processed.

- **Educate with Questions**

- What would your suggested meal cost elsewhere?
- What does it take to prepare from scratch?

- **Educate with Facts**

- USDA reimbursement vs. actual meal costs - labor, facilities, utilities, and service constraints

- **Provide Context**

- History of the NSLP and goals of the program
- We offer [insert] healthy options. Students choose what to eat. Nutrition has been cut out of education requirements. How are most kids eating at home? We feel stuck. It's so hard.

- **Show Your Program**

Fresh produce • Salad bars • Harvest of the Month • Scratch meals



1. School lunches are too processed.

Despite the challenges, we are working hard to do things like reduce sugar, encourage fruits and vegetables, and increase scratch cooking.

We need your support and encouragement to transform our common goals into reality.



2. There are too many artificial ingredients, colors, and preservatives.



Staying Ahead of the Food Additive Bans: Steps for Success



Most Common UPFs Banned in School Meals: Nuggets to Know

Based on a comprehensive review of thousands of school nutrition products completed in January 2026

Least common in SN

- **BVO** - Banned by Aug 2, 2025 - No Items
- **Propylparaben** - Banned in CA by Jan 1, 2027 - No Items in School Nutrition
- **Red Dye #3** - Banned by January 15, 2027 - No Items in School Nutrition
 - Many manufacturers have replaced Red Dye 3 with Red Dye 40
 - Non-SN food: sprinkles, red velvet, marachino cherries, red-colored tortillas
 - Interesting Fact: Carmine is a natural red dye. It consists of crushed insects, so it is not vegetarian, Halal, or Kosher.
- **Potassium Bromate** - 8 Items
 - Keeps bread puffy. Only found in processed yeast-risen breads
 - Also called "Bromated Flour"
 - Found in: soft-baked pretzel dog, par-baked pizza crust
- **Azodicarbonamide (ADA)** - 12 Items
 - Keeps bread puffy. Replaced with DATEM, which is okay
 - Found in: bagels, pizza crust
- **BHA (Butylated Hydroxyanisole)** - 104 Items
 - Keeps high-fat foods from going rancid during long frozen storage
 - Found in: Anything containing pepperoni or sausage
 - Practical Takeaway: Removing means a shorter frozen shelf life
- **Blue 1 & 2 (250), Green 3 (none), Red 40 (19), Yellow 5 & 6 (100)**
 - Cheesy flavors: cheese-powder chips, cheese sauce, cheddar, American cheese
 - Fruit flavors: Pop-Tarts and fruit-filled pastries, fruity cereals and cereal bars, brightly colored frozen fruit slushies, gelatin, jelly, and candy-themed food
 - Frostings and sprinkles - frosted cookies and sprinkles
 - Brightly colored condiments: dipping sauces, salad dressing, pickles, and relish
 - A La Carte Smart Snack products: Fruit snacks, electrolyte sports drinks, carbonated beverages, fruit-flavored beverages, popsicles, and ice creams

Most common in SN



Staying Ahead of the Food Additive Bans: Steps for Success

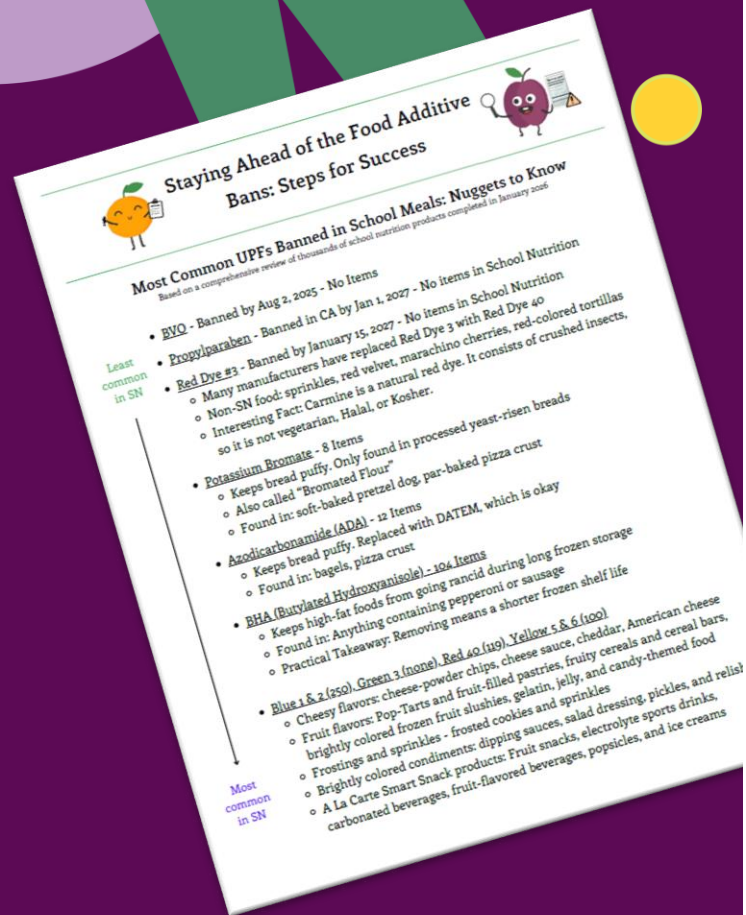


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Action Plan for Success:

- Create a banned products list timeline
- Notify purchasing and suppliers
- Incorporate into SOPs
- Flag and review high-risk products first
- Validate products before purchasing

Communicate
commitment
district-wide



Free support from nonprofits:

- Eat Real: Eatreal.org
- Green Onion: ltfoundation.org/greenonion
- Chef Anne Foundation: chefannfoundation.org

Connect with mission-driven manufacturers

3. Meals are too high in sugar.

Remember back when you were in school? We had cake, giant cookies, soda... That has all been eliminated.

Per regulations, we are allowed to put the equivalent of two small cookies on the lunch menu per week. Our menus contain...

It's also challenging when classrooms are loaded with parties, candy rewards, and sugary fundraisers. (Great opportunity – we need their support. Suggest Wellness Committee involvement.)

4. What about sugar at breakfast?

Background:

HHFKA (2010) rewrote the NSLP but they had a problem...

Data delimma:

Added Sugar was added to nutrition fact labels: Jan 2021

How do we limit added sugar if we don't have data?

4. What about sugar at breakfast?

Reducing sugar in flavored milk:

School: 8 gm

Nutrition Facts	
Serving size	(8oz)
Amount per serving	
Calories	120
% Daily Value *	
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 5mg	2%
Sodium 100mg	4%
Total Carbohydrate 21g	8%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Total Sugars 20 g	
Includes 8g Added Sugars	16%
Protein 8g	
Potassium	8%
Vitamin D	20%
Calcium	20%
Iron	0%
* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	

Grocery store: 18 gm

Nutrition Facts	
Serving size	1 bottle (414 mL)
Amount per serving	
Calories	250
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 4.5g	6%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 20mg	7%
Sodium 190mg	8%
Total Carbohydrate 40g	14%
Dietary Fiber <1g	2%
Total Sugars 39g	
Includes 18g Added Sugars	36%
Protein 14g	28%
Vit. D 4.3mcg 20%	Calcium 490mg 35%
Iron 0mg 0%	Potas. 560mg 10%
Vit. A 260mcg 25%	
* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.	

4. What about sugar at breakfast?

Reducing sugar in cereal:

School: 6 gm
- 25% less sugar

Grocery store: 18 gm
(Honey Smacks)

25% LESS SUGAR			
		25% LESS SUGAR THAN ORIGINAL CINNAMON TOAST CRUNCH™. NO REDUCTION IN CALORIES.	
		SUGAR CONTENT HAS BEEN REDUCED FROM 8G TO 6G PER SERVING.	
Nutrition Facts		Amount per serving	% Daily Value*
Serving size 1 bowl (28g)		Total Fat 3g	4%
Calories per serving 110		Saturated Fat 0g	0%
		Trans Fat 0g	0%
		Cholesterol 0mg	0%
		Sodium 170mg	7%
		Total Carbohydrate 22g	8%
		Dietary Fiber 3g	9%
		Total Sugars 6g	
		Includes 6g Added Sugars	11%
		Protein 2g	
* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.			
Vitamin D 10% • Calcium 6% • Iron 10% • Potassium 0% • Vitamin A 6% • Vitamin C 6% • Thiamin 10% • Riboflavin 6% • Niacin 6% • Vitamin B ₆ 10% • Folate 10% (30mcg folic acid) • Vitamin B ₁₂ 10% • Zinc 10%			

Serving size/Tamaño por ración 1 Cup/1	
Amount per serving/Cantidad por ración	Cereal/CEREAL
Calories/Calorías	130
	% DV*/% VD*
Total Fat/Grasa Total	0.5g 1%
Saturated Fat/Grasa Saturada	0g 0%
Trans Fat/Grasa Trans	0g
Polyunsaturated Fat/Grasa Poliinsaturada	0g
Monounsaturated Fat/Grasa Monoinsaturada	0g
Cholesterol/Colesterol	0mg 0%
Sodium/Sodio	45mg 2%
Total Carbohydrate/Carbohidrato Total	32g 12%
Dietary Fiber/Fibra Dietética	2g 7%
Total Sugars/Azúcares Totales	18g
Incl. Added Sugars/Incl. azúcares añadidos	18g 36%
Protein/Proteínas	2g

4. What about sugar at breakfast?

- Juice is a small 4 oz size
- Limit sugar in yogurt to 2 grams per ounce
- What valid challenges do you face?
 - *Kids don't want to eat a heavy protein breakfast when they are barely awake.*
 - *We are only allowed to feed them early, before school.*
 - *Is there an opportunity to work together for BIC or Breakfast after the Bell?*

4. What about sugar at breakfast?

We are working limiting added sugar to less than 10% of calories across the week for our menus.

- Implementation timeline: July 1, 2027
- Action plan:
 - Nutrient analysis software (\$\$\$ + time and expertise)
 - Identify highest sugar entrees
 - Add protein options

Meal Components



Teaching students how to eat nutritious, balanced meals

Meat and Meat Alternates



5. You aren't serving enough protein.

1 cup yogurt, ½ cup beans, 1 large egg = 2oz equivalent meat

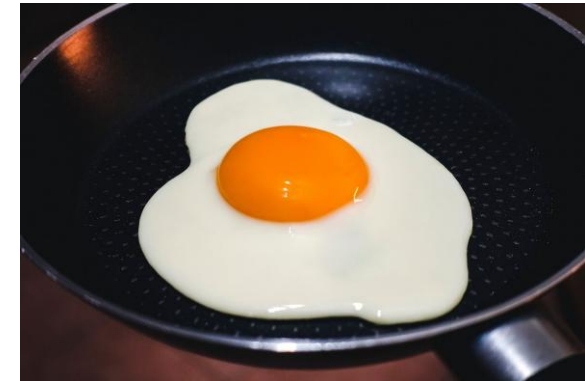
8 grams



7 grams



6 grams



6. Why can't we use a 2 oz scoop when the portion size is 2 oz shredded cheese?



Weight vs measure:

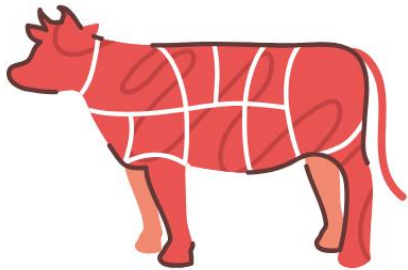
- Use lettuce as an example: 1c = 1.7 oz
- Cheese: 2 oz weight = 4 oz volume

Importance:

We value protein.

Use the correct measurements- Don't cheat the kids!

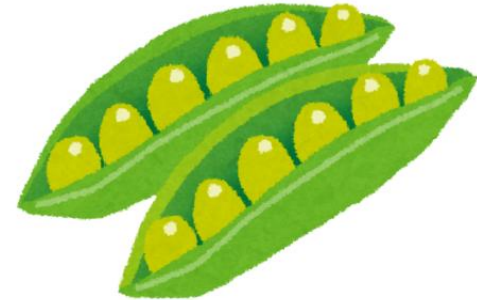
7. Why can't you offer a vegan mushroom burger?



2 oz Beef
12 gm protein



0.5 c Mushrooms
1.5 gm protein



1/2 c Soybeans
9 grams protein

8. School lunch is mystery meat.

We value minimally processed foods.

Almost anything that has two or more ingredients is processed.

- Raw Turkey -> added ingredients and cooking -> Turkey deli meat

3 oz turkey deli meat
= 2 oz cooked plain turkey +
1 oz other things





FACT:
**School lunches are America's most
transparent meals.**

Grains



9. Why does meat count as a grain at breakfast?





We do have some frustrations with the regulations

10. Why is a 2 oz muffin not 2 oz grains?



Grains chart lists grains in order of highest concentration of grain to lowest.

Exhibit A: Grain Requirements For Child Nutrition Programs^{1, 2}

Color Key: Footnote 5 = Blue, Footnote 3 or 4 = Red

Food Products per Group	Ounce Equivalent (oz eq)	Minimum Serving Size
Group A	Ounce Equivalent (oz eq) for Group A	Minimum Serving Size for Group A
Bread type coating Bread sticks (hard) Chow Mein noodles Savory crackers (saltines and snack crackers) Croutons Pretzels (hard) Stuffing (dry) <i>Note: weights apply to bread in stuffing</i>	1 oz eq = 22 gm or 0.8 oz 3/4 oz eq = 17 gm or 0.6 oz 1/2 oz eq = 11 gm or 0.4 oz 1/4 oz eq = 6 gm or 0.2 oz	1 serving = 20 gm or 0.7 oz 3/4 serving = 15 gm or 0.5 oz 1/2 serving = 10 gm or 0.4 oz 1/4 serving = 5 gm or 0.2 oz
Group B	Ounce Equivalent (oz eq) for Group B	Minimum Serving Size for Group B
Bagels Batter type coating Biscuits Breads - all (for example sliced, French, Italian) Buns (hamburger and hot dog) Sweet crackers ⁵ (graham crackers - all shapes, animal crackers) Egg roll skins English muffins Pita bread Pizza crust Pretzels (soft) Rolls Tortillas Tortilla chips Taco shells	1 oz eq = 28 gm or 1.0 oz 3/4 oz eq = 21 gm or 0.75 oz 1/2 oz eq = 14 gm or 0.5 oz 1/4 oz eq = 7 gm or 0.25	1 serving = 25 gm or 0.9 oz 3/4 serving = 19 gm or 0.7 oz 1/2 serving = 13 gm or 0.5 oz 1/4 serving = 6 gm or 0.2 oz
Group C	Ounce Equivalent (oz eq) for Group C	Minimum Serving Size for Group C
Cookies ³ (plain - includes vanilla wafers) Cornbread Corn muffins Croissants Pancakes Pie crust (dessert pies ⁸ , cobbler ³ , fruit turnovers ⁴ , and meats/meat alternate pies) Waffles	1 oz eq = 34 gm or 1.2 oz 3/4 oz eq = 26 gm or 0.9 oz 1/2 oz eq = 17 gm or 0.6 oz 1/4 oz eq = 9 gm or 0.3 oz	1 serving = 31 gm or 1.1 oz 3/4 serving = 23 gm or 0.8 oz 1/2 serving = 16 gm or 0.6 oz 1/4 serving = 8 gm or 0.3 oz
Group D	Ounce Equivalent (oz eq) for Group D	Minimum Serving Size for Group D
Doughnuts ⁴ (cake and yeast raised, unfrosted) Cereal bars, breakfast bars, granola bars ⁴ (plain) Muffins (all, except corn) Sweet roll ⁴ (unfrosted) Toaster pastry ⁴ (unfrosted)	1 oz eq = 55 gm or 2.0 oz 3/4 oz eq = 42 gm or 1.5 oz 1/2 oz eq = 28 gm or 1.0 oz 1/4 oz eq = 14 gm or 0.5 oz	1 serving = 50 gm or 1.8 oz 3/4 serving = 38 gm or 1.3 oz 1/2 serving = 25 gm or 0.9 oz 1/4 serving = 13 gm or 0.5 oz

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Group C	Ounce Equivalent (oz eq) for Group C	Minimum Serving Size for Group C

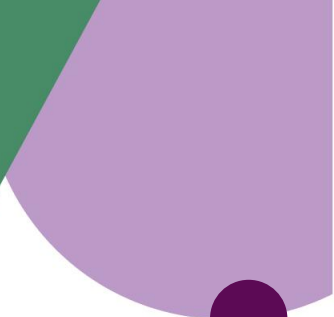
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11. Why can't I offer K8 students a 1 oz cereal bowl and 0.5 cup fruit every day for breakfast?



Fruits





12. Why do I have to be careful about offering an 8 oz fruit juice?

Fruit juice calculation: 50% rule

13. Why don't we have to credit fruit as 1/2 cup equivalents instead of 1 fruit?

Fruit	Yield
1 Apple	3/4-1 cup
1 Banana	1/2 cup
1/2 cup Blueberries	1/2 cup
1/4 cup Raisins	1/2 cup
14 large Grapes	1/2 cup
1 Orange	1/2 cup
1 Peach	1/2 cup



14. Why are some fruits credited as more than others?



14. Why are some fruits credited as more than others?



Common Errors in Crediting Fruit

Kiwi
Apricots
Small Plums
Apricots



Stone Fruit (Apricots, Plums, etc.)



Kiwis



Small Citrus

Vegetables



15. Why do students have to take ½ cup fruit or vegetable with every meal?



16. Why are green beans not in the green or the bean group?



17. Why are green peas not in the Beans/Peas group?



18. Why do heated beans have a different yield and different weight per half cup beans than unheated beans?



Milk



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19. Why does a choice of milk have to be offered at every meal?



20. Why can't I offer oat and almond milk?

NLSP Milk Requirements:

Nutrients per Cup (8 fl oz.)

Calcium: 276 milligrams (mg)

Protein: 8 grams (g)

Vitamin A: 500 international units (IU)

Vitamin D: 100 IU

Magnesium: 24 mg

Phosphorus: 222 mg

Potassium: 349 mg

Riboflavin: 0.44 mg

Vitamin B-12: 1.1 micrograms (mcg)

Showdown - Nutrition Facts: Dairy Milk vs. Oatmilk



School nutrition programs take milk very seriously.

Finding:

“Fluid milk was not available at lunch in at least two varieties throughout the serving period on all meal service lines. During the lunch meal service, students were only offered one type of milk, after the site ran out of chocolate nonfat milk on one of the serving lines. This finding was not systemic, as the site was short-handed on the day of review. However, this was a repeat finding from the SNP Administrative Review conducted in May of 20--. As a result, lunch meals will be disallowed..”



Communication Strategies



Key Takeaways - Response Framework:

1. Listen first

- Ask thoughtful questions
- Understand concerns, assumptions, and values

2. Find common ground

- Acknowledge higher idea concerns.
- Agree where you genuinely can
- Come from their perspective: free labor, unlimited budget...

Key Takeaways - Response Framework:

3. Educate and Collaborate

- Explain program history, reimbursement rates, costs, and regulations
- Share your vision and current efforts
- Identify changes, even if small or not now but in the future

4. Channel Their Energy into Action

- Suggest opportunities for involvement (Wellness Committee, volunteering, attending events)
- Encourage advocacy... turn critics into partners and champions!

Questions?

Send follow-up questions to:

Melissa Manning, RDN

Melissa@MySchoolRD.com

We want to hear from *you*!

Please add this session
on the ANC App to
evaluate your experience.

