

## The Health Benefits of School Meals

School meals play a positive role in helping to prevent childhood obesity and promoting the lifelong health and wellness of America's children. School nutrition experts are currently working on an Institute of Medicine task force to update the federal nutrition guidelines for quality school meals.

Dr. Alice Jo Rainville of Eastern Michigan University has conducted research on the nutritional superiority of school meals compared to sack lunches brought from home and additional research supports the fact that school meals served through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) contribute to a healthy childhood weight. A growing body of evidence supports the notion that the NSLP is critical in addressing childhood obesity in America. Consider the following:

- Research by Eastern Michigan University's Rainville concluded that students who eat school lunches consume **less calories from fat** and that school lunches contain three times as many dairy products, twice as much fruit and **seven times the vegetable amounts** as lunches brought from home.
- According to Dr. Robert Murray, MD, FAAP, former director of the Center for Nutrition and Wellness at Columbus Children's Hospital, the cost of providing a universal breakfast and lunch through the NSLP is minimal, compared to the cost of treating the obesity epidemic. Research indicates the positive impact of breakfast and lunch on the academic performance of students. Through the NSLP, children consume **twice the servings of fruits and vegetables** and **greater amounts of grains and dairy**.
- A University of Maryland study released in the September 2005 issue of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* found that federal food programs, including the National School Lunch Program, **do not promote incidence of obesity in the poorest children**.
- A study in the August 2003 issue of *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* concluded that girls in food-insecure households had significantly **reduced odds of being at risk of overweight if they participated in the National School Lunch, School Breakfast and Food Stamp Programs**. The research highlights the importance of food assistance programs to low-income children, not only in addressing hunger "but also in potentially protecting them from excess weight gain."

School meals are healthy choices. Federal nutrition guidelines, the hard work and dedication of school nutrition professionals, careful oversight of federal and state authorities and the support of local communities will ensure the continued effectiveness of the National School Lunch Program.