

Healthy Food on the Menu Matters to our Children

By Chef Ann Cooper

Not a day goes by without the media addressing America's growing obesity crisis, and lately the discussion has settled on our children. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has reported that if American children don't get their weight in check, their anticipated health problems will significantly shorten their lives, and make them the first generation in our nation's history to die at younger ages than their parents. In fact the CDC has said, of the children born in the year 2000, one out of every three Caucasians and one out of every two African Americans and Hispanics will contract diabetes in their lifetimes, many before they graduate high school.

With students now back at their desks, lunchrooms are bustling once again with the rekindling of friendships, brown paper sacks, and lunch trays full of school food. But what of the state of school food? Is it getting better? Are we feeding kids healthier? Why should healthy school food matter to every one of us?

A Typical School Lunch

A typical school lunch often consists of some combination of pizza, burgers, nachos, fries and tater tots, with ketchup and ranch dressing, all served with a side of flavored milk. There is no doubt in my mind that these mediocre school lunches are contributing to the obesity crisis and—if we do not take action now to make school lunch healthy—we will all pay



A typical school lunch?

the price in healthcare costs, and more importantly, the shortened lives of those who are most important to us.

The solution to our health crisis must include dramatic improvements to our National School Lunch Program (NSLP) because so many children depend on it. Each *day* the NSLP feeds over 31 million children, and those numbers are rising as our economy sinks. School lunches are often contributing to this rise in obesity; and diet-related illnesses loom over our children due to the gradual effects bad food has on their health.

Healthy School Lunch

A healthy school-lunch program eliminates highly processed foods and puts an emphasis on fresh whole foods cooked from scratch. But, as you might imagine, choosing fresh, healthy food presents schools with all kinds of challenges. Unlike those of 20 or 30 years ago, most of the cafeterias in today's schools lack fully functional kitchens and the trained staff to operate them, which makes actual cooking a virtual impossibility. Additionally, inadequate funding makes it extremely difficult to shift from highly processed to fresh whole foods.

There are many kinds of whole foods that can be added to our kid's meals; beans are one such food that can be a perfect addition to school lunch menus. Beans have so many

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good qualities that can enhance a school lunch meal: high in nutritional value including protein, great flavor, texture and taste, low cost, and ease of preparation. In my position as director of food services for Boulder Valley School District, I oversee meals that include beans as part of numerous entrees as well



**Atypical school lunch?
Made from scratch and fresh.**

as in salads and side dishes. In a typical week, we might serve lunches such as bean and cheese burritos, tacos, quesadillas, nachos or hummus wraps as well as side dishes that include hummus, pinto beans, refried beans, red beans and rice, black bean and corn salad, as well as beans in many forms on our salad bars.

How Do Commodities Fit?

All of these dishes are made from scratch, require a modest amount of preparation time, limited equipment, and have a reasonably low food cost—all of which are important attributes when overcoming the challenges of moving from processed foods to scratch cooking. Another piece of the school food paradigm is commodity foods. These are foods that come from the USDA and are distributed to schools at 19½ cents for every lunch served. Dried and canned beans are always part of the commodity allocations, which means that they can help lower food costs while

allowing the utilization of whole foods. This savings can then be allocated to fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, whole grains and healthy proteins, as well as the implementation of salad bars, which I believe is one of the best ways to add healthy, fresh, delicious food to school meals.

In school districts all across the country, we are seeing a rise in vegetarian options. In fact, meatless options often account for 20% of our lunches. Given the National School Lunch guidelines on protein combined with our need to reduce fat (especially saturated fat) in school meals, beans can become a mainstay of healthy school lunches.

Facing the Challenges

Of all the challenges in school food reform, one of the largest is finance and part of the solution is participation; we need more kids eating, so whether they or their parents choose school lunch because it tastes good, is vegetarian, or is healthy—it's more kids eating that really makes a difference. And making a difference is what we must do! Overcoming the challenges to reforming school food is a must for the health of our children and their future. 🍃

[*Editor's Note:* What are your views on the school lunch program? Comment on the articles for Vol. 2, No. 3 at beaninstitute.com/dry-bean-quarterly.]



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**Chef Ann Cooper with kids in the
Boulder Valley (Colorado) School District.**

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Beans Boost Nutrition for Children In Lunch Boxes and After-School Snacks

By Liz Weiss, MS, RD and Janice Newell Bissex, MS, RD

All dry beans—pinto, navy, garbanzo, black, Great Northern—are good sources of protein, excellent sources of fiber, and they're packed with health-enhancing antioxidants. As dietitians, we give beans an A-plus for their nutritional merits and mealtime versatility. They are a natural at the dinner table in tacos, chili, and soups, and as we recently discovered, many moms are turning to beans as a nutrient-rich addition to their children's school lunch boxes.

Ham and cheese and bologna sandwiches may be two of the most popular and familiar lunch box staples, but beans offer a welcome change to the mid-day meal with their interesting colors, flavors, and textures. Eating fiber-filled beans increases satiety too, a bonus for students whose undivided attention should be on their ABCs and not their grumbling stomachs.

At MealMakeoverMoms.com, we have a dynamic online community of moms eager to share their success stories at the dinner table (and school cafeteria). Recently, on Facebook, we asked them for their best tips for getting beans into their kid's lunch boxes and onto their after-school snack tables. Here are some of their most creative ideas . . . and some of ours too:

Christina: I make black bean and chicken burritos for dinner and then pack leftovers in the lunch box the next day.* They're easy to make: mix black beans, diced chicken, corn kernels, chopped tomatoes and onion, and reduced-fat cheese with low-fat Italian dressing. Put on a tortilla, fold up, and grill until crispy.

Sarah: I make roasted red pepper hummus for dipping. I also use it on a thin crust pizza topped with roasted garlic, Italian-seasoned chicken, kalamata olives, baby spinach, and fresh cilantro.

Vicky: For after-school snacks, my kids go for beans in a bowl and a toothpick.

Marie: I drain and rinse canned garbanzo beans. Then I sprinkle them with salt and roast them in the oven. They're the perfect snack food.

Liz & Janice: For a satisfying school lunch, create a cold pasta salad by tossing together cooked pasta (use your child's favorite shape), diced red bell peppers, small chunks of reduced-fat cheddar cheese or crumbled feta, garbanzo or navy beans, and an oil and vinegar dressing. When the kids get home, spread shredded reduced-fat cheddar cheese and refried beans (or mashed pinto beans) on a flour tortilla. Microwave for 45 seconds, roll up, and serve with a side of salsa for dipping.

**The burritos should be packed in a cold lunch box until lunch time.*

About the Authors

Janice Newell Bissex, MS, RD and Liz Weiss, MS, RD are *The Meal Makeover Moms* who help busy families eat a healthy and delicious diet. Their latest cookbook, *No Whine with Dinner* (M3 Press, 2011) features 150 healthy recipes and 50 secrets for getting picky eaters to try new foods, especially vegetables. For credible nutrition advice and easy, affordable family recipes, visit their blog, Meal Makeover Moms' Kitchen or listen to their weekly radio podcast, *Cooking with the Moms*.



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Smart Choice Recipe

Fudgy Black Bean Brownies

*Recipe by Liz Weiss, MS, RD and
Janice Newell Bissex, MS, RD*

Our flourless fudgy brownies are gluten free, and we've never met a child yet who didn't love them. No one has to know they are made with black beans, though if you choose to reveal your secret, they'll still disappear the second you serve them. Our kids are especially fond of these brownies after school with a tall glass of low-fat milk.

Ingredients

One 15-ounce can black beans, drained and rinsed	½ teaspoon peppermint extract, optional
3 large eggs	½ teaspoon baking powder
3 tablespoons canola oil	Pinch salt
¾ cup granulated sugar	½ cup mini semi-sweet chocolate chips, divided
½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder	
1 teaspoon vanilla extract	

PREPARATION

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly oil or coat an 8 x 8-inch baking pan or dish with nonstick cooking spray and set aside.
2. Place the black beans in the bowl of a food processor and process until smooth and creamy. Add the eggs, oil, sugar, cocoa powder, vanilla, peppermint extract as desired, baking powder, and salt and process until smooth. Add ¼ cup of the chips and pulse a few times until the chips are incorporated.
3. Pour the batter into the prepared pan, smooth the top with a rubber spatula, and sprinkle with the remaining ¼ cup chocolate chips.
4. Bake 30 to 35 minutes, or until the edges start to pull away from the sides of the pan and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool in the pan before slicing into 2-inch squares.



YIELD:

16 servings

SERVING SIZE:

One brownie (2" x 2")

NUTRIENT INFORMATION PER SERVING:

Calories: 120, fat: 5g (1.5g saturated, 0.3g omega-3), protein: 3g, carbohydrate: 18g, dietary fiber: 2g, sodium: 95mg

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