



The Case For Carrots: A Healthy School Food Public-Private Partnership

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“When working with school food, we need to carry our moral compass. Feeding kids should be a responsibility, not a second income stream. All companies should be serving fresh fruit and vegetables, including pizza lunches, if they want to work in the school environment.” – Ruthie Burd, Founder of the Lunch Lady

Introduction

This case study explores the first two years of a public-private partnership between Nourishing School Communities* (NSC) and Canada’s largest school food provider, the Lunch Lady (LL). NSC is a collaborative and evidence-based initiative that aims to get more healthy and local foods into the minds and onto the plates of school children across Canada. As such, it engages many partners, including private companies. The partnership’s purpose has been to help the LL improve its menu options to offer healthier meals. Engaging with private school food providers has been instrumental, since involving all influencers of healthy school food environments is the only way to successfully shift eating patterns in a meaningful way.¹



Lunch Lady Facts:

- ✓ Offers a lunch program that reinforces healthy food messages taught in the classroom
- ✓ Parents choose from dozens of seasonal options online or on paper menus
- ✓ Meals are individually packaged and labelled
- ✓ No assistance is required from the school
- ✓ A speedy distribution ensures lunch is delivered within minutes of the bell

SMARTER MEALS

Smarter Meals (SM) menu is the primary product of the partnership. The goal was to make healthier versions of meals that were already familiar to students. The following steps were taken in creating the menu:

Step 1: The Heart and Stroke Foundation (HSF) and the LL worked to establish the SM nutritional criteria using HSF pre-established standards, requiring in every serving ≤ 10g of fat, ≤ 720mg, and ≥ 10g of protein.

Step 2: Food group composition analyses were conducted at Maxxam labs. Ten meals were sent, only two met the criteria. This process both highlighted discrepancies in nutritional information provided by food suppliers and calculations used.

Step 3: The LL reformulated meals. These re-designed meals were then re-tested and successfully passed the SM criteria.

Step 4: The SM menu was launched in Sep. 2014, offering 6 healthier options (Table 1). An additional 6 SM were added in Sep. 2015.

Table 1: Smarter Meals Introduced September 2014

	Calories	Sodium	Fat	Protein
3 Whole Grain Pancakes, side syrup and Greek yogurt and berries	450 cal	710mg	4g	13g
Potato and Cheese Pierogis with Power Veggie Mix, side sour cream and unsweetened Apple Sauce	360 cal	500mg	4g	11g
Sweet Plum Grilled Chicken Wrap and a Berry Cup	360 cal	520mg	7g	23g
Teriyaki Chicken Rice Bowl, Steamed Veggies and Fresh Orange Slices	460 cal	520mg	4g	20g
Simply Pasta with Parmesan, Power Veggie Mix and fresh Apple Slices	300 cal	160mg	4g	11g
Premium Turkey Hot Dog, whole wheat bun, sliced cucumbers, and Greek yogurt	350 cal	685mg	10g	22g

Evaluation Methods

An evaluation of the various activities carried out by the Lunch Lady under the partnership was led by the Propel Center for Population Health Impact. A mixed methods approach was used, which included key informant interviews of various stakeholders affected by the partnership (e.g. food suppliers and staff), and a parent survey to be conducted twice over a two year period.^{2,3}

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Findings: Outcomes and Impacts of the Partnership

Table 2: Nutrition Impact of Moving to Scratch Cooking

Ranch Dressing per 15 mL – 1tbsp			
	2014	2015	% DIFFERENCE
	(FROM SCRATCH)		
CALORIES	90	27	82% lower
TOTAL FAT (G)	10	1	90% lower
PROTEIN (G)	.1	1.3	92% higher
SODIUM (MG)	150	83	55% lower

Tomato [Pasta] Sauce per ½ cup			
	2014	2015	% DIFFERENCE
	(FROM SCRATCH)		
CALORIES	90	44	51% lower
TOTAL FAT (G)	3	.2	93% lower
PROTEIN (G)	2	1	50% lower
SODIUM (MG)	480	167	65% lower

- Discrepancies in nutritional data provided by food suppliers pushed the LL to hire a Nutrition and Operations Coordinator and develop a supplier product quality tracking system.
- Food suppliers modified items to meet the LL demands for healthy foods. The fact that food suppliers are willing to do so speaks to the impact small or medium size food service providers can have in changing food service environments when they take the lead on healthy school food.
- The partnership experience influenced the LL to also test base sauces and dressings. Many were found to be high in fat and sodium. The LL decided to make all sauces and dressings homemade (see table 2). This has influenced the company to make many menu items from scratch, transforming the way the company prepares its meals.
- Operational costs became balanced due to more efficient labour practices and savings on food procurement. Cooking from scratch requires more time and is not so closely related to meal orders, balancing labour expenses, and prepackaged foods were found to be relatively expensive compared to raw ingredients, reducing food procurement expenses.

Findings: Parent Survey

- 9,408 parents responded to the survey (15% response rate)
- 43% of participants ordered from the SM menu, of which:
 - 75% indicated that their child enjoyed the Smarter meal
 - 84% would or have ordered a Smarter Meal again
 - 86% would like to see more Smarter Meals on the menu



Conclusions

The partnership has had a positive impact on both the Lunch Lady’s menu and company culture. The response from food suppliers and parents has also been very encouraging. Despite the partnership’s positive outcomes, challenges exist in transforming the school food landscape towards a healthy one, such as the lack of regulatory oversight of nutritional policies, the school fundraising cultures and the deception of online food ordering systems. However, the body of research indicating that balanced meals with fresh fruits and vegetables positively influences the health and academic performance of children supports the Lunch Lady’s efforts.⁵ One of the key recommendations from the partnership’s findings is the need to develop a more consistent approach to nutritional analysis and calculation.

References

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