

HealthierUS School Challenge Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

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Application Procedures

1. Is it possible to apply for the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC) as a district, instead of as an individual school?

Yes, multiple schools can apply under the same district. However, each individual school must submit its own application packet, **except**:

- a) If the same menu and same foods were served throughout the district, the district can submit only one set of 4-week lunch menus, one set of menu worksheets and recipes.
- b) If the same competitive foods and beverages were sold throughout the cafeteria and/or school campus, submit only one set of the Competitive Foods worksheet.
- c) If each individual school follows its district’s wellness policy, submit only one School Policies and Practices checklist.

2. If schools apply for a Gold award and do not meet the criteria, but do meet the criteria for the Silver or Bronze, will they be given the HUSSC award for the lower level?

Yes, if they did not meet the Gold of Distinction or Gold requirements, their application would be reviewed against the Silver and Bronze criteria.

3. If my school had a 3-day week scheduled (the minimum), but 1 day was cancelled due to inclement weather, can we still use that week since they had the planned menu?

No, schools should submit 4 consecutive weeks with at least 3 days of served meals each week. If this is not possible due to unusual circumstances, work with your State Agency and Regional Office.

4. How do we demonstrate we have healthy menu planning practices?

Healthy menu planning practices should be implemented throughout the menu. Ideally, entrée choices should appeal to students, incorporate whole-grain products, and offer a variety of fruits and vegetables on the serving line or salad bar. The HUSSC vision supports a goal that every student should have the opportunity to select a reimbursable lunch that meets the HUSSC criteria.

The use of token items, such as a loaf of whole wheat bread/rolls offered at the end of the serving line, but not menued as part of the meal or planning a very small quantity of the HUSSC items with only a few servings being taken by the students does not support the HUSSC vision. A Gold Award of Distinction application must demonstrate that at least 10% of the students take the HUSSC items on a regular basis.

5. How can I find out if my school is already enrolled as a Team Nutrition (TN) School? If my school is not a TN School, how do I apply?

To see if your school is enrolled in Team Nutrition, go to <http://teammnutrition.usda.gov/database.html>. Select the search page hyperlink and enter the school's ZIP Code to determine if the school is listed in the TN School Database.

The TN school enrollment form can be downloaded online and submitted only by mail or fax. Signatures of the principal and foodservice manager are required in order to process the enrollment form.

6. Why must the State Agency child nutrition director sign off on each application?

By signing off on an application, the State director assures USDA that the application has been thoroughly reviewed by the State Agency and that the school is meeting all HUSSC criteria and is serving reimbursable meals according to 7 CFR 210.10.

7. Will a school be asked to submit additional documentation after it submitted its application?

Possibly. FNS reserves the right to request additional information to verify that the school: (1) serves reimbursable meals, and (2) meets all HUSSC criteria. The menu structure should be fully explained in question 2 on pages 4, 5, 6, and 7 (Lunch Menu Worksheet) of the HUSSC applications and should include information on entrée choices, side dish choices, number of choices the student can choose, and how Offer vs. Serve (OVS) is implemented, if applicable. The review process can be significantly delayed if additional information is needed.

8. What information should the production records include?

Production records should be submitted for the 4-week lunch menus for all applications, except the Bronze. They should indicate actual daily meal count (students and adults); menu items (used to meet meal pattern requirements), planned portion size (by age/grade); quantity prepared for each menu item, a la carte items sold (if applicable), and leftovers.

Menu Criteria

9. What is the basis for the menu criteria for school lunches?

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* serves as the basis for the menu criteria for school lunches. The menu criteria emphasize the same foods that are encouraged in the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines*. Some of these foods include whole grains, dark green and orange vegetables, fruits, dry beans and peas, and low-fat/fat-free milk.

10. Can we provide 2 weeks of menus from one month and then 2 weeks from the next month?

Yes, as long as the weeks are consecutive. The weeks do not have to be confined within the same calendar month.

11. If the menu weeks used are shorter than 5 days, do we still have to meet the same menu criteria as those schools that are using 5 days in the weeks?

Yes. Requirements to meet the menu criteria are not prorated for less than 5 days in the week. Whether you have 3, 4, or 5 days in the week, each day should reflect the menu criteria. For example, if you have a 3-day week for a school that is applying for a *Silver/Bronze* award, they would have to offer whole-grain foods and dark green/orange vegetables all 3 days for that 3-day week. For vegetables and fruits, you must offer a different choice each day.

12. What is meant by the statement that “each child should have the opportunity to select a meal that supports the HealthierUS School Challenge goals”?

Sometimes, the way menus are structured or served can, unknowingly, prevent a child from being able to select all healthful foods included in your meals. This statement is better explained using examples.

Example 1: School XYZ allows students to select only one side dish from the following options: spinach salad, baked beans, and corn. The spinach salad is used to meet the dark green/orange vegetable criteria and the baked beans to meet the weekly dry beans/peas criteria. Since the student can only select one side, he/she would not be able to select both the spinach salad and the baked beans. Because of this, the student would not have the opportunity to select a meal that supports the HUSSC goals.

Example 2: One reimbursable meal serving line offers all the items needed to meet the HUSSC goals and the other reimbursable meal serving line does not. Students are not allowed to cross over from one line to another when selecting food for their meal. In this situation, students have the opportunity to select a HUSSC meal by selecting the meal serving line that offers the HUSSC items.

Example 3: The school offers a “food court” type of meal serving lines. Students can freely move between all lines and select a reimbursable meal. In this situation, students are able to select a HUSSC meal by selecting HUSSC items from any of the serving lines before passing through the point of sale.

While Example 2 and 3 above are currently acceptable, the intent of the HUSSC is that schools should be actively moving toward offering meals that meet HUSSC criteria on all reimbursable meal lines.

Fruits/Vegetables

13. Why is there a requirement to offer dry beans or peas at least once per week?

The *Dietary Guidelines* emphasize more dry beans and peas (legumes) because they provide a broad array of vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients, including those that are nutrients of concern. They are also a great economical source of dietary fiber and plant protein. These products can be purchased in the dry form and cooked at the school, or purchased as canned, precooked. A variety of dry beans/peas are available through the USDA Foods program. They can be served as a meat/meat alternate or as a vegetable, and they may be incorporated into entrees, side dishes, or salad bars. *Note that fresh, canned, or frozen green peas, fresh or frozen soybeans (edamame), and green lima beans, which have a very different nutrition profile, do not count as dry beans or peas.*

14. Why is there a requirement for fresh fruits in the menu criteria?

It is important that menus reflect a variety in the types and forms of fruits that are offered, including fresh fruits. The *Dietary Guidelines* encourages consuming more fruit. Fresh fruits provide fiber and an array of micronutrients including vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals. Also, schools have opportunities to offer fruit to students throughout the school year that are predominately available fresh, such as apples, melons, bananas, strawberries, kiwi, oranges, and grapes, which increases the number of potential fruit choices.

15. Can 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice count as a serving of fruit or vegetable for HUSSC?

Yes. If the serving size is at least ¼ cup, schools may offer 100 percent fruit juice once per week to count toward the HUSSC criteria for fruit. Similarly, 100 percent vegetable juice may count once per week as a vegetable serving. Note that 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice may count toward only half of the total fruit/vegetable requirement in Traditional or Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning. See the USDA *Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs*, page 2-1.

16. What vegetables are counted as “dark green and orange” vegetables? Can we use dark green or orange vegetables that are not on the list?

“Dark Green Vegetables” include dark green leafy vegetables and broccoli. In addition to broccoli, vegetables in this subgroup include spinach, romaine lettuce, collard greens, kale, and turnip greens. Dark green leafy vegetables and broccoli are sources of important vitamins and minerals such as vitamins A, C, and E, folate, calcium, iron, and potassium. Orange vegetables include acorn squash, butternut squash, carrots, hubbard squash, pumpkin, and sweet potatoes. You can only count dark green or orange vegetables that are on the HUSSC list.

17. Can schools offer a salad bar every day of the week to meet the HUSSC criteria for vegetables and fruits?

Yes. Schools that offer salad bars usually offer a variety of vegetables and fruits. As long as the planned serving size is at least ¼ cup for each fruit and vegetable selected, and the required number and kind of fruits or vegetables are offered, schools may count the salad bar toward meeting the criteria.

18. If a school is counting fruits and vegetables from a self-serve salad bar where the foods are not pre-portioned, how is it determined if they are meeting the ¼-cup requirement?

The menu planner defines what the typical serving is from the salad bar, based on actual student consumption. The production records show sufficient quantities are planned.

19. What is meant by “a different vegetable every day” or “a different fruit every day”?

In keeping with the *Dietary Guidelines*, HUSSC encourages schools to offer a wide variety of vegetables and fruits, so that a student can select a different one every day, not merely different

forms of the same vegetable or fruit. For example, if a school offers mashed potatoes, it cannot also count a serving of potato rounds that same week to meet the HUSSC criteria. Apple slices and applesauce also are considered as the same fruit. Schools that offer a variety of individual fruits or vegetables throughout the week may count a mixture of these as a serving in order to minimize waste.

20. Can baked beans count as both a vegetable serving and the weekly dry bean/pea requirement for the Challenge?

Yes, they can meet the dry bean and pea **and** the vegetable requirement for the HUSSC.

21. When several vegetables or fruits are in one dish (e.g., a California Medley or Fruit Salad), can this dish meet the requirement of the HUSSC vegetable or fruit criteria?

Yes, in dishes such as a California Medley, where more than one vegetable is used, one of the single vegetables in the dish can be used to meet the vegetable criteria for HUSSC. For example, the broccoli in the California Medley would meet the dark green vegetable criteria.

Whole Grains

22. How can I determine if a whole-grain product credits as a serving of grains/breads?

Schools should compare the weight of 1 serving of the grains/breads in ounces or grams with the weights listed in the charts on p. 3-15 and 3-16 in the USDA *Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs*.

23. How do you determine if the whole grain is the primary ingredient by weight in a grains/breads product?

A whole grain is the primary ingredient by weight when:

- a) A whole grain is listed first on an ingredient statement, or
- b) In purchased products that contain multiple grains, if the total weight of all the whole-grain ingredients is greater than the weight of the first ingredient listed, then it meets the criteria of whole grains being the primary ingredient by weight.

If a school-made recipe contains multiple whole grains, the total of whole grains must weigh more than any other ingredient.

24. If the grains/breads product contains some whole grain, but whole grain is not the primary ingredient by weight, can I still count the product as a whole grain?

Yes. As long as the product equals 1 grains/breads serving and whole grain(s) is the primary grain ingredient. However, schools must serve a majority of whole-grain products in which whole grain is the primary ingredient by weight. See Question #23.

25. How many times per week must I offer items in which whole grain is the primary ingredient by weight?

To meet the whole-grain criteria, schools which apply for a Gold/Gold of Distinction award must offer products in which whole grain is the primary ingredient at least 3 of the 5 required serving days. For Silver/Bronze award, schools must serve these products at least 2 of the 3 required serving days. For example, brown rice, whole-grain pasta, and oatmeal are considered Group A whole-grain foods, if they meet the serving size requirement. See Question #22.

26. Can I offer the same whole-grain food item each day?

No, at least one of the weekly servings must be a different whole-grain food or product in order to meet the HUSSC criteria. Schools should offer a variety of whole grains each week and over the course of the 4 weeks. Schools will not meet the HUSSC criteria by offering whole-wheat bread as a daily optional whole-grain item. Schools are encouraged to use brown rice, whole-grain pasta, whole cornmeal, oatmeal, or other cooked whole grains to increase the use of whole grains in schools. A variety of whole-grain foods are also available for schools to use through the USDA Foods program (formerly known as Commodity Foods). Various forms of a grain may be counted as different whole-grain foods, such as whole-wheat bread, whole-wheat rolls, and whole-wheat tortillas. Check the whole-grains resources on the HUSSC section of the Team Nutrition Web site.

27. How can my school obtain whole-grain USDA Foods (formerly known as Commodity foods)?

The USDA Foods program, which offers foods to schools, is administered at the State level. The State distributing agency selects food items from the USDA foods available list, those foods that they believe will be most popular in the school/child nutrition programs in their State. If you would like to see more whole-grain product options, please contact your State distributing agency. A list of State contacts can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/contacts/sdacontacts.htm. A list of foods available can be found at http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods/foods_available.htm.

28. Can flax seed count as a whole grain?

No, flax seed is not a grain. Grains are generally the seeds of various grasses. Flax seed is a seed product of a flowering plant, and is not considered a grain product.

29. Can popcorn meet the whole-grain requirement?

No. While popcorn is a whole grain, it is considered a snack food item and is not credited as grains/breads in the USDA *Food Buying Guide*. Popcorn will not count toward the HUSSC whole-grain criteria even if it is served as an extra component of the reimbursable meal.

30. If the ingredient label lists “whole corn treated with lime” as an ingredient, would the whole-corn ingredient still be considered a whole grain?

The product would only be considered a whole grain if the documentation from the manufacturer indicates that the manufacturing process used to prepare the corn with lime retains the pericarp, or bran layer.

Milk

31. Can flavored fluid milk be offered?

Yes. Low-fat (1% or less) and fat-free (skim), flavored or unflavored milk can be offered.

Nutrition Education and Physical Activity

32. What are the nutrition education criteria for elementary schools?

- a) Nutrition education is provided to at least half of the grade levels in the school;
- b) Healthy eating messages and activities are integrated into existing classroom instruction, such as health education, science, language arts, and reading and writing classes. This type of instruction should include the use of *MyPyramid* and *MyPyramid for Kids* lessons, other Team Nutrition materials, or their equivalent. You can download *MyPyramid* lessons at: <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/mypyramidclassroom.html>,
- c) Nutrition education activities involve the classroom, cafeteria, and home/parents.
- d) Messages are reinforced by prohibiting the use of food as a reward (school holiday parties are excluded).

33. What are the nutrition education criteria for middle and high schools?

- a) Nutrition education is offered to middle school students in at least one grade level as part of required year round instruction.
- b) Nutrition education is offered to high school students in 2 courses required for graduation.
- c) Nutrition education involves multiple channels of communication.
- d) Messages are reinforced by prohibiting the use of food as a reward (school holiday parties are excluded).

34. What are the physical education/activity criteria for elementary schools?

- a) Structured physical education (PE) classes are provided to students throughout the school year. These classes count toward the PE time requirements. **Up to 20 minutes (Bronze/Silver) and 45 minutes (Gold/Gold of Distinction) of the PE requirement may be met by providing structured physical activity planned by a certified PE teacher and implemented by a classroom teacher or school administrator. All students must participate in the physical activities which must be at least moderate-intensity and in increments of at least 10 minutes.**

- b) In addition, physical activity opportunities are provided daily for students outside of physical education class. For example, regular scheduled recess, physical activity breaks during the school day within the classroom, intramural sports, walk to school program, etc. This does not count toward the time requirements for physical education.
- c) Reinforcing physical activity/education messages by neither denying nor requiring physical activity as a means of punishment.

35. What are the physical education/activity criteria for middle and high schools?

- a) Offer structured physical education classes to at least two grades and provide students in all grades opportunities to participate in physical activity (intramural/interscholastic sports or activity clubs) throughout the school year.
- b) In addition, actively promote participation in physical activities (in and out of school) to all students.
- c) Reinforcing physical activity education messages by neither denying nor requiring physical activity as a means of punishment.

36. If my school’s competitive foods meet the stricter sodium requirements for the Gold of Distinction, what level of structured physical education would be required?

For elementary schools, the school would have to provide a minimum average of 90 minutes per week of structured physical education throughout the school year and meet stricter sodium requirements for competitive foods to qualify for the Gold of Distinction Award. If the elementary school provides a minimum average of 150 minutes per week of structured physical education throughout the year, they do not have to meet the stricter sodium requirements to receive a Gold of Distinction award. For secondary schools, the school’s competitive foods would only have to meet the stricter sodium requirement for the Gold of Distinction award.

Competitive Foods and Beverages (Including a la Carte and/or Vended Items)

37. What is the basis for the competitive foods criteria?

The HUSSC criteria reflect the recommendations of the 2005 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) published recommendations (April 2007) for foods that should be served in schools outside of the organized school lunch meals. Competitive foods criteria emphasize limiting the intake of foods high in calories, total fat, saturated fat, *trans* fat, added sugars, and sodium.

38. Do these criteria eliminate selling whole milk and 2 percent milk either a la carte and/or through school vending? Why?

Yes. The 2005 *Dietary Guidelines* specifies that Americans (age 2 and older) use fat-free and low-fat milk and milk products.

39. Why was a 200-calorie limit put on portions of items for vended sale?

A 200-calorie limit was placed upon pre-packaged vended or a la carte sales in an effort to control portion size and thus calories. Additionally, schools that prepare foods for a la carte sales are required to limit the portion to the serving size of the food served in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

40. Can my school offer an entrée as an a la carte item if it is not offered as part of the lunch menu that day?

Yes. However, the entrée would have to meet the HUSSC Competitive Foods criteria. For example, if pizza is sold a la carte, but is not offered as an NSLP entrée on that day, the pizza would have to meet the criteria for fat, *trans* fat, saturated fat, sugar, sodium, and portion size/calories.

41. If my school uses Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP), what serving sizes do I need to use in order to meet the competitive food portion size criteria?

For NSMP, the serving size is defined by the menu planner based on the planned meal. If a school sells a second entrée a la carte, that entrée is exempt from meeting the competitive foods criteria, and the portion size of the second entrée must be the same or smaller than the serving size offered in the school lunch program. Any a la carte items that are not part of a reimbursable meal must meet the competitive foods criteria.

42. If my school meets all of the Gold award criteria and only sells low-fat or fat-free milk a la carte, does my school qualify for a Gold Award of Distinction?

Yes. By selling only milk a la carte, the school meets the competitive foods criteria of the Gold Award of Distinction award. Schools do not need to meet both the Competitive Foods criteria **and** the higher Physical Education criteria to qualify for the Gold Award of Distinction. Elementary schools that meet the stricter sodium requirement under competitive foods must still provide 90 minutes per week of physical education throughout the school year.

43. Do beverages have to meet the sugar criteria?

No. Only low-fat or fat-free milk, 100 percent juice, and water can be sold as competitive beverages in order to meet any of the HUSSC award levels. These beverages are exempt from the sugar criteria.

44. Does the Gold/Gold Award of Distinction competitive foods criteria address only items sold by the school, or does this include other school-sponsored activity sales?

The Gold/Gold Award of Distinction criteria include all foods and beverages made available at the school, to students on the school campus, and throughout the school day. Examples of food and beverage sales/service that would require meeting the nutrition guidelines or standards are:

- Foods or beverages sold a la carte in the school cafeteria
- Foods or beverages sold in vending machines, school stores, or snack bars operated by the school
- School-sponsored food and beverage sales during the school day

45. Do the foods served at birthday parties or other classroom events have to meet the Challenge criteria?

No. Schools are not expected to monitor what a parent sends to school for a birthday party. However, schools may have policies on birthday parties/classroom events as part of their school wellness policies.

46. Do the food items sold at a fundraiser after school have to meet the competitive foods criteria? Why or why not?

No, the food items sold at an afterschool fundraiser do not have to meet the competitive foods criteria. The competitive foods criteria only apply to school-sponsored foods and beverages sold during the school day. For creative ideas related to fundraising, see the *Healthy Fundraising Tips* resource included in the HUSSC Application Kit.

Participation

47. Why was the elementary school lunch average daily participation (ADP) criteria for elementary schools set at 70 percent for both Gold applications?

Data from the *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA) Study II* (July 2001) indicated that the average daily participation, based upon enrollment, of elementary schools randomly selected for this national study was 67 percent. The *SNDA Study III* (November 2007) showed that average daily participation of elementary schools has improved to 73 percent. An elementary school that is being nationally recognized as having an excellent school nutrition program is expected to have an average daily participation rate of at least 70 percent.

48. How was the middle and high school ADP criteria established?

Due to the popularity of the challenge, draft secondary school HUSSC criteria were established in the spring of 2009 by members of the working group that established the elementary school criteria in 2004 and others. Because of the inherent difference between elementary and middle and high schools, the draft secondary school criteria were reviewed by local school food service directors of HUSSC awardees, state agency personnel across the country and regional and national office staff of the Food and Nutrition Service. The criteria established reflect the HUSSC vision of recognizing excellence in nutrition and physical activity.

49. Our school has a low percentage of students approved for free and reduced-price meals, thus our participation is low. Will USDA make allowances for lowering the ADP for such schools?

The ADP criteria apply to all schools regardless of percentage of low-income students. USDA recognizes that many factors may influence ADP rates. In order to address this, there is no ADP criteria for the Bronze level to serve as incentive for schools to begin serving healthier meals that will ultimately lead to higher ADP and the opportunity to achieve a higher level award. Additionally, the ADP for silver level has been eased to 60% for elementary/middle schools and 45% for high schools. USDA believes that any school recognized as having excellence in nutrition should maintain a high school lunch participation rate. Meals that are planned and prepared to meet quality standards should be appealing to all children in the school. For helpful ideas to increase participation, see *Tips for Increasing Participation* included in the HUSSC Application Kit.

50. Do we need to use a specific month for reporting our ADP?

No. You can report your ADP for any month prior to the date the submitted menus are served.

51. In my school, kindergarten students do not stay for lunch. Must I include these students in my enrollment in order to calculate my ADP?

No. If school lunch is not accessible or available for kindergartners, do not count them in the participation data.

Recognition

52. What type of recognition will schools receive if they receive an HUSSC award?

Schools that successfully meet the Challenge will receive a recognition plaque and a banner. In addition, the recognized schools will be listed on the Team Nutrition Web site, and may be chosen to be a part of national FNS media events that recognize schools for their leadership and excellent school meals program. Schools are encouraged to market their success to their community via the newspaper, parent newsletters, etc. and are expected to maintain their high level of excellence throughout the four year certification period.

Recordkeeping/Documentation

53. What kind of recordkeeping and/or documentation is required of schools after they have received certification?

Schools should maintain the HUSSC criteria during the 4-year award period and the school must keep copies of the following documents on file during the certification period:

- Menus served

- Menu documentation (including food production records, Child Nutrition (CN) Labels, Food Product Ingredient Labels, Nutrition Facts Labels, etc.)
- Recipes, if school-made, for products sold/served
- Food Product Ingredient and Nutrition Facts labels for items sold a la carte

54. What is the time period for my award?

Awards are good for a 4-year period, from the date of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) approval. Before your award expires, you should apply for recertification. If possible, try for the next higher award level.