

Changing the a la Carte Options at Your School



Though a la carte items (items such as chips and ice cream that are sold in addition to the school meal) are common in almost all public school districts in Maryland, many parents are not aware these items are sold at the school their child attends. A la carte items rarely if ever appear on a school's menu and only appear on district school food services web sites about a third of the time, often hidden in unlikely places, with titles like "Price List" or combined with other food items under nutrition information charts. For this reason, even at the elementary level, parents may not be informed that these items are available in their child's school cafeteria.

However, at most schools, if a parent wishes, they can contact the cafeteria manager to find out what is offered and block their child's access to these options.

A la carte items are regulated by USDA rules called "[Smart Snacks in Schools](#)," which mandate that they have ≤ 200 calories; $\leq 35\%$ sugar by weight; $\leq 35\%$ fat and $< 10\%$ saturated fat by calories; ≤ 230 mg sodium; and either the first ingredient should be from a major non-grain food group, contain $\geq 50\%$ whole grains or have whole grains as the first ingredient. Beverages are limited to 100% juice, plain and flavored milk, and low-calorie drinks (≤ 40 calories/8 fluid ounces). Despite these rules, most a la carte items are low in nutritional value, high in sugar, or contain artificial colors, which have been shown to cause hyperactivity in some susceptible children. Typical a la carte items in Maryland schools include fruit snacks and roll-ups, baked chips such as Cheetos and Doritos, popcorn and popcorn chips, pretzels, cookies, ice cream bars, Rice Krispie Treats, Pop Tarts, granola bars, yogurt, soft pretzels, juice, slushies, Craisins, and breakfast items like muffins and cinnamon rolls sold again at lunch.



One way to exchange unhealthy a la carte items for better choices is a request from a school's Wellness Committee. A Wellness Committee is formed through a school's PTA. Any PTA member can propose forming such a committee to PTA leaders, which will usually require a few interested parents, completing a work plan and budget request and getting PTA approval. When the committee convenes, goals can be refined and then work, such as replacing unhealthy a la carte items with healthier

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alternatives, can begin. Usually this requires coming to a consensus among parents through a parent survey or at a PTA meeting, then asking for the support of your principal.



In Montgomery County, Bradley Hills Elementary School and Somerset Elementary School have active wellness committees that have taken strides towards promoting healthier foods at their schools. Somerset instituted a Nutrition and Wellness committee last school year and raised over \$2,500 through a [FarmRai\\$er](#), which will be used for health and wellness initiatives. Then with the support of the principal and in cooperation with the cafeteria manager, Somerset removed unhealthy a la carte menu items, such as Cheetos and Doritos, and replaced them with healthier

options, such as 51% whole grain pita chips, popcorn, hummus, cheese sticks, and dried chickpeas. For the first time this past year, the a la carte menu was published and distributed to parents, making them aware of their child's food options at school. Two years ago, Bradley Hills was also able to replace less healthy a la carte options with healthier options, although they have had to remain vigilant as less healthy items have crept back into cafeteria offerings when they weren't watching.

Through their great progress in improving school nutrition, these schools demonstrate the capacity of a wellness committee to create change, especially in replacing a la carte menu options, which is an important way to impact student health and behavior.

Healthy School Food Maryland is a coalition of organizations and individuals in Maryland working for whole, real, local and safe foods for children in Maryland school cafeterias.

Phone: [301-202-4812](tel:301-202-4812)

Email: info@healthyschoolfoodmd.org

Website: healthyschoolfoodmd.org

