



Healthy School Food
MARYLAND

Public Schools - Healthy and Safety - Food Transparency

HealthySchoolFoodMD.org

Background

Federal and state regulations as well as local wellness policies govern the general parameters of the foods and beverages that can be sold in public schools.

While these regulations eliminate some of the least healthy foods for children (e.g., candy, soda and deep-fried items), they still allow for the sale of a **large variety of processed, unhealthy foods.**

This typically includes cookies, ice cream, chips, Rice Krispie Treats, “fruit” snacks and high-sugar juices. These foods are even sold at the elementary level in some public school districts in



Maryland. These a la carte items **can often be purchased using a lunch card or pin number without the knowledge of the parents.** These a la carte or competitive foods are rarely mentioned on menus or listed on the public school food service menu web site, nor on the web sites of individual schools. Therefore, **parents are usually unaware of the availability of these items** or that children can purchase them instead of a complete meal using their lunch account. Some school districts allow parents to block the purchase of these items; however, few parents know about the items or the option to block their purchase because there are no a la carte menus and a la carte items aren't listed on the other menus.

Purpose of the Bill

This bill requires every public school system in Maryland to include on their existing menus all items sold a la carte in their districts that are not already sold as part of regular school meals. Listings must include brand and flavor names (e.g., “Doritos Cool Ranch” rather than just “chips”). If a la carte foods differ from school to school, local school systems may either create an individual menu for each school or include a disclaimer prior to listing these items on their menu stating, “Offerings differ by school; please contact your school’s cafeteria staff for your school’s a la carte list.” This bill gives control back to parents over what their child may eat.

Benefits to Our Children and Families

- 26% of Maryland's high school students are overweight or obese (CDC, 2013), yet **many children do not eat the fruits and vegetables served as part of school meals because they are filling up on a la carte snacks** such as chips, cookies and ice cream. Greater transparency about these offerings will alert parents to this reality and allow them to take action to better protect their children's health.
- Parents will have the information necessary to make educated decisions about which foods they would like their children to be able to purchase.
- Giving parents information about food sold in their schools will empower them to ask for changes to the school food so that lessons about good nutrition are reinforced rather than contradicted by the school cafeteria's offerings.
- Parents will be alerted to additional foods that may be available in the case of food allergies.



Next to the cash register in a Maryland middle school.

Responses to Potential Criticism

- *There are too many items to list on the menus.* **False.** Most a la carte menus change little from year to year and consist of a limited list of about 30-50 items, many of which are flavors of the same item. There is currently room on menus for marketing and community messages. This spaced would be better used to inform parents about the food sold in the cafeteria.
- *If we list these items on menus, children are more likely to purchase them, resulting in a diet that is lower in nutrition.* **False.** Students are universally aware of the existence of these foods in school cafeterias. Even if they never enter the cafeteria, they see their friends eating them. Parents, however, are not aware, and are more likely to prevent their purchase if they are made aware of their existence.
- *If we list these items on menus, we will have lower a la carte sales, which subsidize our meals program.* **Response:** Many school districts around the country have revamped their meal programs to exclude a la carte items and encourage the purchase of complete and healthy meals using a variety of methods, from scratch cooking to salad bars (even for kindergartners) to burrito and Asian bars. Our hope is that this bill will spur school districts to begin to find innovative ways to fund their programs other than at the expense of our children's health.

Healthy School Food Maryland coalition partners:

Brickyard Educational Farm
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Coalition Halting Obesity in Children Everywhere (CHOICE)
Crossroads Community Food Network
Glen Haven Elementary School PTA
GrowingSoul
Healthy Kinder, Inc.
Maryland Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance

Maryland Environmental Health Network
Maryland Public Health Association
Montgomery County Food Council
Montgomery Victory Gardens
Prince George's County Food Equity Council
Real Food for Kids - Montgomery
Safe Grow Montgomery
Student Section of the Maryland Public Health Association
UMB Center for Integrative Medicine, Food and Community Health Program
Young Activist Club