

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
School Meal Nutrition Standards Commission (SMNSC)

Wednesday, January 22, 2025

9:00 AM – Remote Meeting

Call to order: Co-Chair Rachel Colchamiro called the meeting to order at 9:04 AM.

Roll Call: Denise Courtney conducted roll call for meeting attendance. Quorum met at 9:07 AM.

Commission Members Present:

- Co-Chairs:
 - Rachel Colchamiro, Director, Nutrition Division and Massachusetts WIC Nutrition Program, Department of Public Health
 - Robert Leshin, Director, Office for Food and Nutrition Programs, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Legislative Representatives:
 - Dennis Burke, on behalf of Senator Jason Lewis
 - Sasha Severino, on behalf of Representative Andy Vargas
- Governor Appointees:
 - Juliana Cohen, Adjunct Professor of Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
 - Jessie Curran, Sustainability and Wellness Manager, Sodexo
 - Aminah Herzig, School Programs Manager, Healthy Chelsea
 - Wendy Ng, Director of Food Services, Gloucester Public Schools
 - Sasha Palmer, Director of Food Services, Public Schools of Brookline
 - Kumara Sidhartha, Chief Health Equity and Wellness Officer, Cape Cod Healthcare
- Advocates:
 - Beth-Ann Farrow, MA Healthy School Lunch Coalition
 - Sam Icklan, Director of Community Nutrition Services, Project Bread
 - Sarah Littmann, Representative of the School Nutrition Association of Massachusetts

Absent: None

Other Attendees: Denise Courtney, Nicole Good, Diana Hoek, Terri Mendoza, Claire Santarelli, Kristina Webber and several unnamed members of the public.

Agenda: Co-Chair Rachel Colchamiro reviewed the agenda.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Juliana Cohen made a motion to approve the meeting minutes from November 24, 2024. Sarah Littmann seconded the motion. Minutes approved at 9:07 AM.

Group Discussion: Feasibility of Implementing Measures A-D as outlined in Section 77

The commission shall make recommendations on the feasibility of implementing measures to increase the nutrition of school foods, including, but not limited to: (A) enhancing standards for food served at schools in the commonwealth, including, but not limited to, the sugar content, dietary fiber content, limits of saturated fat and cholesterol in and ultra-processing of products; (B) providing clearly-labeled daily vegetarian or vegan options; (C) accommodating religious, cultural, medical and non-medical dietary restrictions, including, but not limited to, food allergies and lactose intolerance; and (D) requiring food service providers to provide information to schools on the nutritional content of menu items and the location where the purchased produce is grown and processed.”

Topic A: Enhancing standards for food served at schools in the Commonwealth

Opportunities for Growth:

- **Seat time:** Currently there is no state minimum time for lunch. Students can have anywhere from 15 – 25 minutes for a lunch period. This timeframe includes travel to and from their classroom and standing in line to receive lunch.
- **Consumption:** Balancing varied student needs/preferences with generalized nutrition recommendations/operational limitations.

Discussion Points:

- It is important for schools to consider cafeteria size and lunch lines when thinking about seat time.
- It is a best practice for local wellness policies to state the duration of the lunch period.
- Providing a balanced approach to seat time is helpful. One commission member proposed a recommendation for schools to set a goal of 25 minutes of seat time, which can be addressed in their local wellness policy. This balanced approach allows for documentation and awareness.
- The group agreed to move this topic of conversation to the end of the meeting if time allows and focus on Target A specific areas: non-dairy milk, saturated fat, fiber, and ultra-processed food.

Discussion Points: Saturated Fat

- New 2025 Dietary Guidelines are focusing on decreasing saturated fats.
- There are current USDA Guidelines already limiting saturated fat
 - Saturated fat must be <10% of total calories/day
- A commission member noted a research study that analyzed the current levels in school meals and lunch, which are, on average, 6 grams of saturated fat (approximately 9% of calories).
- The School Nutrition Director noted that with the current standards, restricting saturated fat to less than the federal limit of <10% of total calories over the course of a week would be very difficult to implement; for example, with current guidelines, one can only serve a beef burger once per week.
 - When planning a menu, food service directors must plan items that meet the current guidelines, consider allergies, and what students want to eat.
- Most saturated fats on the menu come from animal proteins (cheese, dairy, beef, chicken).

Discussion Points: Fiber

- A commission member noted that from a health perspective, it's important to consider the role of fiber in food groups and how fiber can be present in school meal offerings. For example, beans and lentils can be added as fiber-rich meat alternatives.
 - Health guidelines exist regarding minimum dietary fiber. However, nutrition standards for school meals do not have specific targets for fiber.
- DESE clarified that Child Nutrition Program meal patterns are intentionally food-based instead of nutrient-based to focus on whole foods and the tray as a tool for nutrition education for children. If there are fiber-fortified products that look like everyday products it can hinder the use of the NSLP as a nutrition education tool.
- School Nutrition Programs are required to offer a legume every week, at least once per week. Some schools offer legumes more frequently. This comes back to training and scratch cooking on increasing menu options.

- This is the first year that schools are required to serve breakfast, which means increased options for whole foods and whole fruits at breakfast.
 - The Nutrition Director noted that edamame is served on their menu almost every week, and students are very excited about it.
- Current research shows that school lunches have, on average, 7.8 grams of fiber and 3.4 grams of fiber at school breakfast.
- A commission member shared that Chicago Public Schools called out fiber in their meals - 3 grams at breakfast and 7 grams at lunch.
- A School Nutrition Director agreed on the importance of fiber and noted the school meal pattern has components that must be offered (two of those components are fruit/vegetables) and are the best sources of dietary fiber.
 - Students are required to take a fruit or vegetable at lunch or it's not free.
 - Other component – 2 oz. of grains are offered (80% of grains must be whole grains).
 - School nutrition directors want to offer as many options as possible, and additional training and support helps school meal programs meet this goal.
 - Important to note that school nutrition professionals are often moms/caregivers re-entering the workforce, and scratch cooking training is necessary to increase menu options.
- A commission member reminded the group to consider the potential for “unintended consequences” when we focus on a single nutrient versus a whole food approach.
 - Example: if the focus is specifically on fiber (versus the sources like whole grains, fruits, and vegetables), then we get product reformulation with fiber added to it to meet the regulations (which may not have the same benefits as getting fiber from the whole food).
 - A second commission member noted that we don't want to “push fiber” where it shouldn't be.
- When evaluating a school nutrition program, there is much value in USDA's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP).
 - The FFVP introduces new foods to students and provides nutrition education.
 - Suggest increasing documentation when operating the FFVP program, recording which classrooms are receiving FFVP, and looking at the nutritional analysis; that helps to increase the overall amount of fiber offered.
 - A School Nutrition Director noted starting the FFVP in 2019 and has seen a significant increase in fruit and vegetable intake among students.
- A commission member noted that research has found that once a child has fruit on their tray, they eat, on average, half of it. There are often concerns that students throw fruit away untouched, which of course sometimes happens as with any food item. But this requirement has led to more children eating half a fruit.
- How can the commission look at the best practices and existing things that are happening? Can they review case studies and learn from school nutrition directors who are doing this?
 - This will help when thinking about scale.
- A commission member noted that support and education around serving beans and legumes is needed. They are low-cost, easy to prep, and recognizable foods.

Discussion Points: Sugar

- Starting next year, standards will be implemented to reduce sugar in milk, yogurt, and cereal.
- Consideration for the group: Could Massachusetts be at the forefront of limiting non-nutritive sweeteners? Concerned about increased artificial sweeteners as an unintended consequence of enhanced sugar limitations.

- Commission member noted that from a medical standpoint, the sugar-to-fiber ratio of a product matters.

Discussion Points: Ultra-Processed Foods

- No discussion.

Topic B – Providing clearly labeled daily vegetarian or vegan options

- Brookline Public Schools has pledged to make 50% of meals be plant-based meals. Their local wellness policy and sustainability policy outlines vegan options.
 - Currently, 46% are plant-based – this is something the students requested and was driven by students.
 - It is difficult to source predominately plant-based items with current procurement guidelines.
 - From a cost perspective, state and federal funds don't cover expenses.
 - Additional support is needed - Brookline partners with the Humane Society, which helps with training, menus, and recipes and provides a chef.
- It is important to think beyond vegan/vegetarian options and have equivalent options. This is an equity and nutritional issue. For example – if the main option is chicken stir fry, there should be a tofu stir fry (not a peanut butter sandwich).
 - This is possible, but further staff training and support is needed.
 - When offering additional choices and options, it's important for the lunch period to be long enough for staff to make and serve these choices.
- Commission member noted that “static” vegan/vegetarian options (for example, beans on a salad bar) is not the same as offering a different vegan/vegetarian menu choice every day.
- **Best practices shared around offering vegan/vegetarian items:**
 - Student-led movements are very helpful. For example, peer-to-peer surveys ask what vegetarian and vegan options students want and why.
 - Students can also note allergies and cultural preferences for menu items.
 - Offer “pop-up” menu items, allowing students to try dishes before putting them on the menu. One of the most successful items was a vegan item.
 - Set up lines for students to build, choose/customize their meals.
 - Customizable dishes are best practices; however, they take additional time during the line. Without expanded time for lunch these types of build-your-own meals are not feasible.

Topic C – Accommodating religious, cultural, medical, and non-medical dietary restrictions

- Group to consider the following points:
 - How can we proactively tell families that they have these options? We communicate in policies, but it's still a missed opportunity.
 - What are the needs of the community?
 - Example - Kosher style versus certified kosher (where it must be prepared in a kosher kitchen).
 - This isn't a one-size-fits-all model. It is imperative to understand specific students and environments.
- A School Nutrition Director noted procurement challenges and finding reliable, accessible vendors.

- Agreed on the importance of offering lactose-free or plant-based milk for students with allergies or preferences. The concern is the feasibility of procurement of these items, but also, where we have nut-free kitchens, we cannot offer almond or coconut milk.
- The commission member noted that non-dairy options include both milk and solid options, such as cheese. Some populations have higher levels of intolerance to dairy, and this should be considered an equity issue to align with the Commonwealth's equity goals.
 - *Clarification: "In the United States, the following ethnic and racial groups are more likely to have lactose malabsorption: African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanics/Latinos. Because these ethnic and racial groups are more likely to have lactose malabsorption, they are also more likely to have symptoms of lactose intolerance."*
- Point of information: Processed foods like vegan cheese cannot be credited the same way cow's cheese can and would require manufacturers to submit specific types of documentation to be credited in the school meal program.
- Commission members noted that some students feel awkward or embarrassed asking for Lactaid or special milks.
 - Group to consider how we can make this equitable, safe, and accessible for students.
 - Communication between families, school nurses, and school nutrition departments is critical. Local wellness policies can help leverage these conversations.

Topic D – Requiring food service providers to provide information to schools on the nutritional content of menu items and the location where the purchased produce is grown and processed

- School Nutrition Programs are required to use produce grown in the US. Many programs label local produce on menus and serving lines.
- USDA announced \$1.3 billion for Northeast Food for School (NFS) funds, of which \$12 million is Massachusetts' share. As part of this NFS program, it is required to report where the produce is from.
- School Nutrition Directors noted the importance of supporting the farm-to-school movement. MA Farm to School has helped with the procurement of local products.
 - Brookline Public Schools uses a 250-mile radius for local foods and are also investing in hyperlocal, growing some of their own items used in recipes.
- School Nutrition Directors commented that schools need assistance with grants. Applying for a grant takes a lot of time, and if funds are received, tracking and documentation require additional time.
- Commission member comment: Being transparent about food's nutrition content and where it comes from helps build trust amongst families and helps them make informed decisions.
- Question – Many districts use digital menu tools that can be publicly viewed. What would it look like to have a universal tool that districts could use?
 - Answer: A universal tool wouldn't be needed as districts can use many different software tools. These software tools are expensive; examples provided:
 - School Nutrition Director noted \$10,000 per year
 - School Nutrition Director noted \$18,000 per year
 - School Nutrition Director noted \$30,000 per year and software includes a website and interactive menu that allows parents to filter meal accommodations

Facilitated discussion with commission members on the next steps:

- DESE and DPH will summarize conversations from the two meetings held to date as feasibility recommendations that could be included in the report.
- The commission will discuss the recommendations and focus on their feasibility, as the group is charged with that.
- A commission member noted that this was a robust meeting and thanked the co-chairs for aligning the agenda with the commission. Noted that there is a need for an investment in resources and training since schools across the state vary in their capacity to implement recommendations.
- The group agreed to come back to conversations on recess and seat time and to discuss additional meetings before adjournment.

Facilitated Discussion: Seat Time and Recess (Continued from the beginning of the meeting)

- A commission member stated that the healthiest meal students receive in a day is a school meal. We need to provide students with ample time to enjoy this meal.
 - School meals are often the first time in the school day that students can make decisions for themselves.
 - Research shows that recess before lunch is important and gives students the opportunity to burn off energy. Students also love recess and want to play
 - Recess before lunch also allows staff more time to scratch cook and prepare more options.
 - Universal free school meals = more options, more students eating.
 - State legislature support around seat time is needed.
- A School Nutrition Director noted that their participation increased, but their facilities have remained the same, so they had to think about creative ways to serve more students.
- Legislative Rep noted that the impact on class time and other issues related to changing recess requires a larger discussion.
- A School Nutrition Director noted that the “cafeteria is the largest classroom in the district.” It’s worth getting additional time.

Next Steps

- Commission members agreed to extend the time for the next meeting, February 5, 2025, from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. to allow for additional discussions on feasibility.
- Commission members can submit helpful resources, additional comments, suggestions to the agenda, etc., to co-chairs via email by Monday, January 27, 2025.
- The goal of this commission is to prepare a report by the end of March. The commission can’t set standards but can make recommendations in the report.

Meeting adjourned at 11:46 am, on motion of Kumara Sidharath, seconded by Sarah Littmann.
Commission to meet again on Wednesday, February 5, 2025, at 9:00 am.

Documents Used During Discussion:

- SMNSC Slide Deck