

White House Honors Healthiest US Schools

The First Lady hosted close to 1,000 guests from schools that have revamped cafeteria nutrition and made fitness a priority as part of the HealthierUS School Challenge



Photo Credit: Bob Nichols/USDA

By **Hollis Templeton** *fitbie*

First Lady Michelle Obama and the USDA hosted a reception on the South Lawn of the White House on Monday to honor the participants in the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC). In March, the First Lady promised the special event, which welcomed close to 1,000 nutrition directors, cafeteria professionals, and principals, as she encouraged schools to work toward the goal of doubling the number of HUSSC-certified schools within 1 year. The original goal of 1,250 schools was met in August, and as of September, 1,631 schools have been certified, according to the USDA.

Video: What's causing childhood obesity?

A cornerstone of the First Lady's Let's Move! campaign to end childhood obesity, the USDA-led challenge recognizes elementary, middle, and high schools that create healthier environments for students by offering nutritious food and drink choices, providing nutrition education, and increasing opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day. (**Search:** How do I keep my kids fit?) Since the inception of the voluntary certification program in 2004, awards have been given to schools in 44 states. For a full list of winners, visit fns.usda.gov.

Guests at Monday's event enjoyed cooking demonstrations from White House chefs and music from Navy and Marine bands. Honorees also mingled with the Obamas' personal trainer Cornell McClellan, members of the Let's Move! team, and representatives from President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition, including gymnast and Olympic gold medalist Dominique Dawes.

While the First Lady may be the face behind the movement to end the epidemic of childhood obesity in America, the nation's educators are the unsung heroes, she said in a keynote speech during Monday's

reception: “So much of what we’ve accomplished these past couple of years, so many of the victories that we’ve won for our kids have happened because of you,” she told her guests.

“Because you all mobilized and organized, we passed historic legislation here in Washington to improve and provide more nutritious school meals to more of our children. We’re helping install salad bars in more than 800 schools, bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to hundreds of thousands of kids across this country,” Obama continued.

More: [The State of the School Lunch](#)

“With Michele Obama interacting directly with us, it was a high-profile experience for schools that have succeeded in taking the HealthierUS School Challenge, and a carrot to the other 99% of eligible schools that could take the challenge,” said Jill Jayne, RD, also known as the “rock star nutritionist.” Jayne hosts the [Jump with Jill Show](#) in Community Unit School District 300 in Carpentersville, IL, where 17 elementary schools have received HUSSC certification. Jayne has performed 22 times in the district and has also produced three YouTube videos that promoted the HUSSC.

Jayne, who began working in the nutrition field about 10 years ago, said the event was culminating for her: “[When I started], we weren’t allowed to use the word ‘obesity’ for kids,” she recalls. In contrast, Monday’s celebration kicked off with USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack emphasizing the issue of childhood obesity and the challenges it presents to future generations.

Today, a third of kids are obese and we face a higher prevalence of [diabetes](#) and other chronic diseases that result from obesity. Eventually, this may pose a challenge to workplace productivity and economic security, said Vilsack. It also raises questions as to whether or not we can sustain an all-volunteer military when many young people do not meet the physical requirements necessary to join the armed forces, he said.

More: [Learn how you can beat diabetes without giving up the foods you love](#)

Monday’s celebration also served to inspire more schools to accept the HUSSC and to encourage members of certified schools to become better spokespeople for the initiative, said Vilsack. He encourages schools to share what they know and have learned with other districts, help neighboring schools meet challenge criteria, provide guidance and expertise to state lawmakers, and share their stories with USDA’s [Team Nutrition website](#).

Guests also heard from a student speaker as well as Becke Bounds, Director of Child Nutrition, Coordinated Health, and School Nurses for the Lamar County School District (LCSD) in Purvis, Mississippi, and a role model for HUSSC success.

To date, 11 out of 15 schools in the LCSD have been awarded HUSSC grants, five schools receiving Gold awards and six schools receiving Gold Awards of Distinction, the USDA’s highest honors. In fact, Purvis High School was the first high school in the nation to receive the HUSSC Gold Award of Distinction.

In the LCSD, 80% of the district’s 9,200 students receive free or reduced-priced lunches. The school district’s

cafeterias offer students a mix of green and orange vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and salads made with spring mix and chopped romaine, instead of less nutrient-dense iceberg lettuce, and homemade whole grain croutons. Kids pick from among three vegetables and three of four fruits daily. Salt is slowly being reduced in many dishes and replaced with blends of herbs and seasonings. Fryers will continue to be removed from kitchens and replaced with combination ovens, which are equipped for convection, steam, and combination cooking.

More: [11 Brain Foods for Kids](#)

LCSD has been honored by the Mississippi state legislature, the state's department of education, as well as the Obama administration. The district has been awarded a total of \$72,000 in grants from the State of Mississippi and the USDA, which it plans to use for further equipment upgrades.

While the number of schools participating in the challenge has doubled, there's still a long way to go. These 1,631 certified schools represent just over 1% of schools eligible for certification—those participating in the National School Lunch Program, which uses federal funds to help approximately 95,000 schools and childcare institutions feed more than 32 million children.

In September, Vilsack announced \$6.4 million in Team Nutrition Training Grants to help schools meet challenge requirements. The funding will provide elementary and secondary schools with nutrition education materials, resources for children and parents, and technical assistance and training for school food service providers and communities.

Vilsack says that schools achieving HUSSC awards will continue to see visits from the First Lady and other government leaders. The USDA will also continue to find creative ways to emphasize the issue of childhood obesity and wellness, like its Chefs Move to Schools program and healthy recipe contests.

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