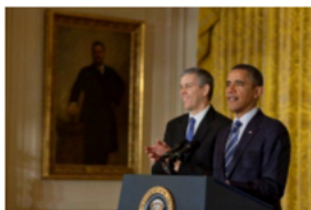


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First Lady Michelle Obama Recognizes the HealthierUS School Challenge Participants

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Given that many children eat as many as two meals a day at school, it's pretty clear that schools have a vital role to play if we're going to combat the disturbing rise in childhood obesity we've seen in recent years. Just as clear is that schools participating in USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge honored at the White House this week demonstrate the kind of deep commitment needed to create and maintain a healthy school environment. These schools are leaders that set an example for schools across the country.

The [HealthierUS School Challenge](#) is a key component of First Lady Michelle Obama's [Let's Move!](#) initiative to end childhood obesity within a generation. In February 2010, USDA and the First Lady called on stakeholders to double the number of Challenge schools in a year – a goal reached in June – and add 1,000 schools per year for two years after that.

The 1,273 challenge schools honored at the White House on Monday voluntarily agreed to provide healthy meals based on the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), including a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain foods, and fat-free or low fat milk. Challenge schools also have to do what schools do best: They have to *teach* their students what it means to eat smart. They have to ensure that kids take part in regular physical activity. To achieve that goal some schools offer creative options, such as supporting walking clubs and community-sponsored sports tournaments, or by just keeping a basket of simple items available for students to use during recess, such as jump ropes or hula hoops.

First Lady Michelle Obama and USDA believe that schools can take a leadership role in helping students learn to make healthier eating and active lifestyle choices that will result in healthier children and young adults. Knowing how and why to eat smart is important, but a good diet must be balanced with adequate physical activity to maintain good health.



First Lady Michelle Obama delivers remarks on Healthier U.S. Schools Challenge at the South Portico of the White House, Oct. 17, 2011. With Mrs. Obama on stage are: Alex Roman, 12, from Walsh Elementary School in Chicago, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, and Becke Bounds, Child Nutrition Director, Lamar County School District, in Mississippi. (Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy)

Healthy eating patterns learned in childhood and adolescence promote optimal childhood health, growth, and intellectual development. Unhealthy eating patterns contribute to children being overweight, and increases in childhood obesity, and diabetes.

School-based nutrition education also helps children develop lifelong eating patterns consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and [MyPlate](#). Teaching children how to make healthy food choices and the components of a balanced plate increases the likelihood that they will be receptive to the healthy options at school and also use these skills when they are off of the school campus.

Some children who participate in child nutrition programs eat more than half their calories at school. Improving USDA's child nutrition programs on behalf of the roughly 32 million kids who participate in the National School Lunch Program and the nearly 12 million participating in the School Breakfast Program across the nation is a top priority for the Obama Administration.

Meeting the requirements for [HealthierUS School Challenge](#) recognition demonstrates a school's deep commitment to create and maintain a healthy school environment by promoting good nutrition and physical activity. And the schools recognized this week are a shining example of this dedication.

As President Obama in his State of the Union address: "... if we want to win the future... then we also have to win the race to educate our kids." And if we intend to win that race, we must ensure that no kid should have to try to learn on an empty stomach but has access to the healthiest, most nutritious food we can provide, plus physical activity they need for a healthy lifestyle and a healthy future.

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