



## Backgrounder on Healthy Eating at School

Students need to eat well in order to grow and develop properly, but many young people today aren't getting what their bodies need. Consider these statistics:

- Fifty-five percent of Grade 10 students, particularly girls, tend to skip breakfast.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly half of all teenage girls do not eat the minimum number of servings from any of the four food groups.<sup>2</sup>
- More than half of all teenage boys do not eat the minimum number of servings of vegetables and fruit or milk products.<sup>2</sup>
- More than twenty-five percent of all calories consumed by teens come from non-food group foods, which includes high fat, sugary and/or salty foods.<sup>2</sup>

Research shows that students who eat breakfast make more healthy food choices and have more healthy eating habits overall.<sup>3</sup> Students who participate in school breakfast programs perform better academically, and are absent and late for school less often. They behave better, appear happier and are more able to learn than students who skip breakfast.<sup>4,5</sup>

**“Healthy schools are not a luxury, they are a necessity.”**  
(Andre Picard, *Globe and Mail*, Sept. 9, 2004)

On the other hand, children and adolescents who skip breakfast tend to miss other meals as well, which makes matters worse.<sup>3</sup> They score much lower on tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic and general knowledge.<sup>6</sup> They are also more susceptible to illness and more likely to be absent.<sup>7</sup> Poorly nourished students are more likely to be suspended and to have difficulty interacting with their peers.<sup>8</sup>

Dietary adequacy and variety are specific aspects of diet quality important to academic performance, thereby highlighting the value of consuming a diverse selection of foods in order to meet the recommended number of servings from each food group.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, fruit and vegetable consumption and dietary fat intake, two critical nutritional concerns among children, are important to academic performance.<sup>9</sup>

Schools can play an important role in fostering healthy eating habits in students. The *Healthy Eating at School* website provides a starting point for schools that are ready to dig in to a host of healthy options that work for everyone involved. Schools that have already taken action can use these tools to work on new goals each year.



“[The school setting is] one of the most promising settings for helping children and youth develop healthy ways of living.” (Perry Kendall, An Ounce of Prevention, A Public Health Rationale for the School as a Setting for Health Promotion: A Report of the Provincial Health Officer)

1 “Young People In Canada: Their Health and Well Being”, Chapter 7, William Boyce, Public Health Agency of Canada-Division of Childhood and Adolescence, 2004.

2 “Food Habits of Canadians: Food Sources of Nutrients for the Adolescent Sample”. Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research, Phillips S, Jacobs Starkey L and Gray-Donald K., 65 (2): 81-84, Summer 2004.

3 “Nutritional Status, Body Weight, and Academic Performance in Children and Adolescents”. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Rampersaud GC, Pereira MA, Girard BL, Adams J, Metz J. Breakfast Habits, 105:743-760, 2005.

4 “Diet, breakfast and academic performance in children”. Annals of Nutrition and Metabolism, Kleinman RE, Hall S, Green H, Korzec-Ramirez D, Patton K, Pagano ME, Murphy JM, 46 Supp 1: 24-30, 2002.

5 “The Relationship of school breakfast to psychosocial and academic functioning: Cross-sectional and longitudinal observations in an inner-city school sample”. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, Murphy JM, Pagano ME, Nachmani J, Sperling P, Kane S, Kleinman RE, 152:899-907, 1998.

6 “Brief fasting, stress, and cognition in children”. American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Pollitt E, Leibel R, Greenfield D, 34: 1526-1533, 1991.

7 Statement on the Link between Nutrition and Cognitive Development in Children. Center on Hunger, Poverty, and Nutrition Policy, Medford, MA: Tufts University School of Nutrition, 1998.

8 “Food insufficiency and American school-aged children’s cognitive, academic, and psychosocial development”. Pediatrics, Alaimo K, Olson C, Frongillo E, 108: 44-53, 2001.

9 “Diet quality and academic performance”. Journal of School Health, Florence MD, Asbridge M, Veugeliers PJ, 78 (4): 209-215, April 2008.