

School Lunch is the Nutrition Winner! (from the School Nutrition Association)

ALEXANDRIA, Va., August 26, 2002 – Moms, you can take a break from packing school lunches with a clear conscience. Research shows that children who participate in school lunch programs eat more nutritious noon meals than do those who bring lunches from home.

Measuring food actually eaten, registered dietitian Dr. Alice Jo Rainville, of The Human Nutrition Program of Eastern Michigan University, compared the lunches of 570 second, third and fourth grade students in two Michigan school districts. She observed calorie counts of the two types of lunches to be similar, averaging 577 calories. However, school lunches, which must meet one-third of a child's daily nutritional needs, provide more variety, and better nutrition.

Overall, the school lunches provided more of eight major vitamins, and more calcium, iron and zinc, protein and fiber. School lunches had twice as much fruit and seven times the amount of vegetables as lunches brought from home.

Because the mainstay of the lunchbox is the sandwich, it offers more bread and meat items. Kids are also treated to three times more snack foods in lunches brought from home. This combination makes for more carbohydrates, fat, sugar and Vitamin C in the lunchbox, the latter from fortified fruit drinks or fruit snacks.

Juice boxes are prevalent in lunches brought from home and they encourage children to forgo the purchase of milk to go with their lunch. Nutritionists suggest that "overjuicing" contributes to low calcium intake as well as weight problems in children. Milk was included in 87% of the school lunches and only 7% of lunches from home. "The calcium shortage among American children is a major public health issue," says Gaye Lynn MacDonald, president of the American School Food Service Association. "Kids' drinks can help make or break good nutrition. That's why milk is always offered as a part of school lunch. Most schools make a point of serving a variety of flavors of milk, as well as low fat and fat free milk choices."

Similar research results comparing school lunches with brown bag lunches have been shown in studies in New York and Salt Lake City. Minnesota researchers learned that school lunches are significantly lower in fat and higher in protein, Vitamin A, calcium and iron than a la carte lunches. "These studies show that school lunch plays a major role in keeping our children healthy," says registered dietitian Martha Conklin, chairman of the school nutrition practice group of the American Dietetic Association. Gaye Lynn MacDonald adds, "School lunches sometimes get a bad rap, but this research is further evidence that school meals are healthy meals!"