

Fresh Perspectives Series

Examining common misconceptions surrounding school meals to offer guidance on how to steer the conversations within your community!



Claim: “School Meals are Too Processed”

Let’s Take a Closer Look...

Response: The concern that school meals are “too processed” is common among parents and the general public. While some processed foods are included, the United States Department of Agriculture ensures that meals meet specific [nutritional standards](#) under the National School Lunch Program. In general, while school meals incorporate processed ingredients, **many schools are actively working to increase the amount of fresh, whole foods on their menus.** To better understand the reality of what is served in schools, it is essential to know the difference between processed and ultra-processed foods:



Processed Foods

Definition: Any food that has been changed from its raw, natural state.

Examples: Washing, cutting, cooking, canning, freezing, drying, mixing, and packaging.



Ultra-Processed Foods

Definition: Foods that have been heavily altered through industrial processing and contain numerous additives

Examples: Often high in sugar, salt, unhealthy fats, artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives.

Crucial Points to Chat About...

Here are our recommended points to offer up during any discussion to effectively **express your commitment and efforts** to offer minimally processed foods at your sites!

- ✱ **Processed Foods in Meal Service:** It’s a fact that school meals often feature kid-friendly favorites like pizza, burgers, and chicken nuggets. However, these food items are held to nutrition standards and are typically more healthful than what you find at the store.
- ✱ **Serving Fresh Foods:** Alongside the main entrée, school meals incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables as side options, minimally processed by washing, slicing, and packaging.
- ✱ **Federal Nutritional Guidelines:** School meals must adhere to specific nutritional standards, which include restrictions on fat, saturated fat, sugar, and sodium. Also, Arizona passed [HB 2164](#), which prohibits the sale or service of ultra-processed food on the school campus during the normal school day.
- ✱ **Variety in School Meals:** Schools are encouraged to provide dishes that reflect the community's preferences, while also prioritizing scratch-made items alongside the processed options they offer.
- ✱ **Impact of Grants:** Local Foods for Schools: Participating schools receive reimbursements for using minimally processed local and regional foods in their meal programs.



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