

FIT TO LEARN TIP SHEET

# Healthy Celebrations and Rewards



**Aa**



FIT TO  
LEARN®



Aa



**Celebrations and rewards are a big part of school culture. Help students make nutritious food choices all day long! Beyond regular meals, snacks are sometimes offered during in-class celebrations or as rewards from a teacher. When schools reinforce healthy habits in the classroom, students learn consistent lessons that can last a lifetime.**

### **Why is This Important?**

Snacks offered as part of celebrations and rewards are part of a category called “competitive foods”—foods and beverages outside the regular school meal program. (This category also includes foods sold in vending machines, school stores and as part of fundraisers.) Competitive foods matter because they send a strong message about food choices and offer an opportunity to model healthy behavior. Students who receive consistent messages about good eating are better able to put those lessons into practice. Providing students with regular access to unhealthy foods at school undermines school-wide efforts to promote healthy eating. Studies show that students who do not have regular, easy access to unhealthy options at school are more likely

to develop healthy eating habits—before, during and after school. A CDC report states that it’s important for students to receive a “strong, consistent message” from adults as well as “access to healthy food and the support of persons around them.” In the fall of 2012, CPS passed a Healthy Snack and Beverage Policy, which establishes nutritional standards for food available to students outside the school lunch program, including a la carte items sold in the cafeteria, vending machines, fundraisers and school stores. This policy is necessary because these “competitive foods” include snacks high in sugar, salt, or fat, and students often will choose these foods instead of the school lunches that adhere to nutritional standards.

### **Get Started**

Learn about your school wellness policy requirements around school celebrations and rewards. The CPS Wellness Policy:

- Prohibits taking away recess, PE or physical activity time as a consequence
- Prohibits the withholding of food as a punishment
- Requires teachers, staff and administration to use creative positive incentives instead of food to reward student behavior
- Recommends offering physical activity as a reward for good behavior
- Each school is now required to limit celebrations where food and beverages of minimal nutritional value are served or sold to two per school year. Schools are expected to ensure all foods sold as part of school fundraisers adhere to the Healthy Snack and Beverage Policy nutrition guidelines.



Aa



## Try these Quick Tips

Encourage healthy celebrations:

- Focus on fun rather than food: Plan activities and themes to keep kids excited without snacks being the main event.
- Celebrate creatively by setting up craft stations and playing music in the background.
- Have a scavenger hunt for items or information in the classroom or around the school. Have children search for items related to the party theme.
- Have a dance party, such as learning an Irish step dance for St. Patrick's Day.
- Instead of a party, organize a special community service project. Invite senior citizens to lunch, decorate pillowcases to give to a homeless shelter, or make holiday cards for hospital patients.

Try non-food rewards:

- Buy inexpensive pencils in bulk, saying "Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_'s All Star!" or another personalized message. Students will love getting them as a reward, and they can be used in class! (Thanks to Shaina Vincent of Ogden International School for this tip.)

## Learn from Success Stories

Consider some of the ideas that teachers and school nurses have shared! Many thanks to Phyllis Powell Pelt, RN, MS, ILCSN and the teachers who have shared their great ideas on healthier rewards that still keep kids engaged and excited.

- Try a new kind of birthday cake: Take a watermelon, cut it in half, and stick candles inside instead of using a cake. It's a fun and healthy way to celebrate!
- Keep it consistent: Healthy changes will be most successful when everyone in the school is ready to do their part in creating a culture of wellness. Share the message in a positive way and celebrate the seemingly small changes that staff are making. For example, office staff can switch out candy jars for stickers or other items; and parents and community members can serve healthy snacks at their meetings in the school.

- Make leadership a reward. One teacher made each student a shirt that said "School Leader" with each student's name on the back. Students who had good behavior all week got to wear their shirts on Friday and read to preschoolers in the afternoon. A great way to reward your students while giving them a chance to practice their reading skills!
- Make phone calls home for good behavior. You can make calls home to tell parents about their kids' great behavior; or consider creating opportunities for children to make calls home telling their parents about their good work. (Thanks to KIPP Ascend Charter School for sharing this tip, which they put in practice every Friday to reward students.)
- Set up a photo recognition board and reward children by displaying their photo on the board.
- Lunch with the teacher! Reward children by inviting them to eat lunch with you. This is a great chance to also set a good example and communicate messages about good nutrition.
- Make it fun: How about a fresh fruit tasting, or a dance party for students? As you make healthy changes, be sure to emphasize fun.



Aa



## Learn from Success Stories

### Skinner North Elementary School, Chicago

Skinner North is making changes to take on the challenge! Where did this school find the motivation to meet high standards for food, fitness and nutrition education?

“We want our kids to be healthy,” said principal Ethan Netterstrom. He explained that as educators, he and his staff realize that children’s needs are not only academic but also emotional, social and physical. “If kids only learn to be academically fit, it is not enough. They have to be thoughtful members of society and have active lifestyles.”

Since the school opened in 2009, school staff has felt strongly about rewarding kids with things other than sweets or pizza. Instead, teachers will celebrate children’s birthdays at morning meeting

circles and in the classrooms by requesting children to share compliments about the birthday child. Children are able to bring school supplies for goodies for their classmates.

For parent and Wellness Committee Chairperson Hemlata Kumar, it was about making sure that what kids learn at home is reinforced at school and vice versa.

“I want the children to learn about good nutrition at our school so they can understand how to make good choices and learn better. This is about creating long lasting habits that will ensure they will live healthy lives at school as well as at home,” she said.

### Hitch Elementary School, Chicago

Principal Debby Reese at Hitch Elementary School explains that she makes it a priority to offer opportunities for all students to develop their mind, body and spirit. Principal Reese explains: “Aristotle knew that the greatest thinkers and learners were those who understood that mind, body, spirit worked together.”

As part of this commitment, Hitch School promotes healthy lifestyles by implementing a non-food birthday celebration policy. Instead of having parents bring in cupcakes as a birthday treat for the class, the school asks parents to instead consider visiting their child’s classroom to read a story of their choice or donate a book in honor of the child’s birthday. Parents may also share non-food treats such as stickers or pencils. By focusing on the child rather than the food, the school is fostering healthy habits.

Principal Reese thought she would have an initial uproar from parents but has instead seen a positive response. “I was surprised by the overwhelming support,” she said. Teachers also supported the change, especially because stopping class 25-30 times a year to have a birthday party has a negative impact on student learning time. Teachers explained that having a school-wide no-food policy made it much easier for them to enforce the rule and not be seen as “the mean teacher.”

Teachers have their own lists of recommended ideas for rewards and celebrations. Principal Reese said, “We give parents a list of recommended items that students can have. Stickers, erasers, pencils—we have a whole list of things.” This list helps minimize confusion and maintain consistent messaging about healthy habits.



Aa



## Example Letter: Healthy Celebrations + Rewards

### **[Insert date here]**

Dear **[insert school name]** parents, guardians, and staff,

As you might know, our school is part of a nationwide movement to create healthy school environments for our children. We are committed to making continual improvements to **[insert school name]'s** school culture and curriculum in areas of food and nutrition education, physical activity, and physical education to support each child's health and achievement. To this end, we are implementing the following guidelines regarding food in classroom celebrations and rewards. At **[insert school name]**, we recognize that a child's health and wellbeing is the result of a team effort between parents, teachers, and the community, and we greatly appreciate your support with these changes.

### Classroom Celebrations and Rewards Guidelines

**[Insert school name]** asks that all classroom celebrations for birthdays, holidays, and student achievement during the regular or extended school day involve activities that make a positive contribution to children's diets and health with an emphasis on serving fruits and vegetables as the primary snack and water as the primary beverage. We also strongly encourage celebrations with non-food focused activities.

If a snack is to be served it must:

- Feature at least one of the following: fresh fruits and vegetables, a low-fat protein item, low-fat dairy item, or a 100 percent whole-grain food
- Have minimal or no added salt and sugar
- If a beverage is to be served it can either be:
  - Water
  - Up to 8 ounces of 100% fruit or vegetable juice

Please see the following page for ideas on healthy classroom celebrations and suggestions for snacks that meet these guidelines. Do not hesitate to contact **[insert contact name]** at **[email or phone number]** should you have any questions or concerns regarding the new school guidelines. Again, we appreciate your support in making **[insert school name]** a healthy, successful school.

Sincerely,

**[insert school principal or classroom teacher name]**



Aa



## Bright Ideas

### Healthy Celebrations

- At the beginning of the year, have students help create a “birthday menu” of healthy celebration ideas.
- Refreshments should complement the fun, not become the main event, and should be chosen for fun, good, taste and health.
- Celebrate creatively by setting up craft stations and playing music in background. Ask parents to provide the supplies such as clay, craft paper, pencils, markers, paints and stickers.
- For a holiday theme celebration, host a scavenger hunt for items or information related to the theme in the classroom or around the school.
- Let kids bring music and balloons for a class party after a big test or before winter vacation.
- Play Olympics: Have teams pick a country to represent and then compete with academic or physical games.
- For birthdays, children can select a favorite activity or invite a special guest to read a book.

### Healthy Rewards: Alternatives to Food

#### Recognition

- Recognizing a child’s achievement on the school-wide morning announcements or the school’s website
- A photo recognition board in a prominent location in the school
- A phone call, email or letter sent home to parents or guardians commending the child’s accomplishment

#### Privileges

- Lunch with the teacher or principal
- “No homework” pass
- Reading to a younger class

#### Tangible Rewards

- School Supplies: pencils, pens or bookmarks
- Toys/Trinkets: puzzles, playing cards or flashlights
- Sports Equipment and Athletic Gear: frisbees, water bottles or jump ropes



Aa



## Healthy Rewards: Food and Beverage Ideas

Ideas that Meet Criteria for Classroom Celebrations and Rewards

### Fruit

Can be served whole, cut into pieces or wedges. The recommended daily intake of fruit for children ages 4-13 is 1-1.5 cups. While fresh fruit is preferred when available, frozen, canned, or dried fruit without added sugars can be served.

- Fruit salads with grapes, apples, berries and melon
- Dried fruit trail mixes
- Applesauce
- Fruit-based popsicles
- Party Idea: Make your own fresh fruit kabob or smoothies with fruit, milk/soy milk and ice.

### Vegetables

Cut into sticks or bite-sized pieces. The recommended daily intake for vegetables for children ages 4-13 is 1.5-2.5 cups.

- Fresh vegetables with dip (carrots, sugar snap peas, bell pepper with yogurt based dips, guacamole and hummus)
- Veggie Pockets (whole-wheat pita pocket or tortilla, vegetables, and hummus)
- Party idea: Make-your-own salad bar

### Whole Grains

Whole grains can be a great snack with nut butter spreads and other healthy dips. The recommended daily intake of grains for children ages 4-13 is 2.5-3 oz.

- Whole grain pretzels and crackers with toppings like low-fat cheese
- Rice cakes made from brown rice
- Popcorn with little or no added salt or butter
- Baked whole grain tortilla chips with salsa or guacamole

### Protein

Nuts, seeds, peas and beans are healthy sources of protein and make easy classroom snacks. The recommended daily intake of protein foods for children ages 4-13 is 4-5 oz.

- Bean dips with vegetables or whole-grain crackers
- Trail mix with assorted nuts and seeds
- Party idea: Make-your-own trail mix

### Low-Fat Dairy

These products can be switched out for calcium fortified alternatives like soy milk if children are lactose-intolerant. The recommended daily intake of dairy for children ages 4-13 is 2.5-3 cups, depending on age, sex and physical activity level.

- Low-fat cheese stick
- Yogurt: individual servings of low-fat yogurt with moderate or no added sugars (No more than 30 grams of sugar per 8 oz. serving)
- Party idea: Build-your-own parfaits with fruit, yogurt and granola

### Healthy Alternatives to Junk Food and Dessert

These items can be swapped in for popular junk food and dessert items such as cakes and cookies.

- Cakes without icing or topped with fruit and reduced fat whipped topping
- Oatmeal raisin cookies
- Fig bars
- Reduced-fat popcorn (light, air-popped popcorn with low salt and little oil)
- Whole grain crackers and cheese cubes

For additional suggestions of healthy school snacks, see the Center for Science in the Public Interest: [cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/healthy\\_school\\_snacks.html](http://cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/healthy_school_snacks.html)