

Introducing Smart Lunch Menus

Make the school lunch menu, including nutrition information, accessible on smartphones and online!

By Robert J. Safransky, Ph.D., and Arthur Dunham, Ph.D.



In the good old days, school lunch menus were printed and distributed around the school and across the community. Teachers posted them on the bulletin boards in their classrooms and parents posted them on their refrigerators at home. Sometimes they featured pictures of vegetables or desserts.

The intent may be to help parents and students plan whether it was a day to “buy” or a day to “take,” but how useful are these lists of generic food items like pizza, fish sticks, salad, corn? How many kids actually look at those menus and plan what they were going to buy for lunch on a particular day? Probably not more than a handful.

In Pinellas County we have started doing things differently. If you want to save money, increase student lunch participation, and gain parental and community support for your food service program, you need to have a “smart lunch” with us!

Leveraging the Technology

In Pinellas County we make an expanded school lunch menu available to students—and parents and staff—on their smartphones! Yes, there’s a free app for that!

The menu is accessible on the district website. The user clicks on a link and the breakfast or lunch menu comes up, often with an attractive color photo of the

Carbohydrate Counts
Largo Middle, Lunch Menus, January 6 - January 10

PLEASE NOTE: Carbohydrate counts are based on information obtained from manufacturers and school recipes and may vary due to product substitutions and/or recipe variations. If you or your child have a medical condition, please check the manufacturer label before consuming any food at school.

Monday Jan 6	SERVING SIZE	CARBOHYDRATES
Cheeseburger Sliders	1 serving	No data available
Orange Chipotle Chicken Bites w/Roll	1 serving	No data available
Farmers Salad	1 serving	41 grams
Green Beans	1 serving	6 grams
Romaine or Mixed Salad	1 serving	7 grams

Tuesday Jan 7	SERVING SIZE	CARBOHYDRATES
Tacos	1 serving	133 grams
Cheese Pizza Crunchers	1 serving	42 grams
Chef Salad	1 serving	31 grams
Refried Beans	1 serving	21 grams
Fresh Veggie Sticks	1 serving	4 grams

Wednesday Jan 8	SERVING SIZE	CARBOHYDRATES
Popcorn Shrimp w/Hush Puppy	1 serving	37 grams
Chicken Sandwich	1 serving	52 grams
Fresh Fruit & Yogurt Plate	1 serving	39 grams
Waffle Fries	1 serving	22 grams
Romaine Salad	1 serving	7 grams

entrée, vegetables, and dessert. The color pictures enhance the students' perception of the menu items. Parents of younger students who have food allergies or diabetes can use the photos to guide students away from forbidden menu items. In addition, each item has nutritional information, including vitamins, minerals, calories, and sugar and fat content. It's a mini-lesson in making healthy food choices.

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Curious? You can see a sample one-month menu in Pinellas County Schools at www.pcsb.nutrislice.com. Click on **Choose a school**. After selecting a school, click on **Choose a meal**; select **Breakfast** or **Lunch**. The entire month of menus is laid out. Click on any item and you can view its nutritional values. Counting carbs? Each menu item includes its total grams of carbohydrates. By clicking on **Menu ingredients** on the right-hand side, scrolling down to **Nutrient and Ingredient Information**, and selecting a category and item, you can also view the ingredients in each item, making it invaluable for those with food allergies. The information can be accessed from regular computers, tablets, and smartphones.

Beyond Simple Access

How will this app save the district money? Pinellas County Schools serve more than 110,000 students. The

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Food Service Department used to print menus and distribute them to the schools to post and to send home with the students. The school system spent \$15,000 per month to print and distribute the paper menus. An online interactive menu means an end to the cost of paper and ink, and an end to the payroll cost for employees to print and distribute the menus.

But will the students and parents use the app? The answer is yes. We have recorded over 10,000 hits per week by smartphones and home computers. Not only is the menu easy to access, it lets students know what they are putting in their mouths—and which foods to avoid if they have allergies. And the parents of students with allergies to certain foods love it because they *know* what their children are eating.

But there's more. A link on top of the page takes parents to a site where they can pay for lunch with a credit card, check their child's balance, see what their child is eating that day, and opt to receive account balance alerts.

What is the cost of implementation? The initial cost to implement the program in our 122 schools was \$28,000 with connections on the school board website. The initial cost to operate the system was \$229.50 per school. The annual cost is approximately \$82 per school, and the annual cost for monthly updates to the menus is \$10,000.

Technology never tasted so good!

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