2017 is the second year of the School Food Environment Grades project, in which Healthy School Food Maryland grades the school food and wellness environment in all 24 public school districts in Maryland on a 12-item rubric. We are proud to see that the grades had a strong impact, with a 56-point overall increase in grades statewide, even with four categories becoming more strict (and two less strict). Our congratulations again to Howard County, for not only again attaining the highest score, but also increasing their score by 8 points. Kudos also go to Baltimore, Anne Arundel, St. Mary’s, Kent and Calvert Counties for raising their grades from between 6 and 12 points from last year. Grades this year were curved by adding 25% to each district, bringing the highest grade (Howard County) to 100% to set the curve.

The rubric covers areas of concern to parents and public health advocates, including consistent access to potable water; farm to school programs; policies prohibiting artificial colors and other chemicals in school food; access to healthier vending options; existence, transparency and power of a district-level standing wellness committee or its equivalent; policies to reduce sugar in school food; transparency about school foods; amount of scratch cooking; variety and repetition of meals; policies on the marketing of foods of minimal nutritional value in school; and practices around salad bars and cut up fruit.
Does your school system serve a variety of scratch-cooked, nutritious meals free of chemical additives?

Does your school system encourage healthy selections through salad bars, farm to school programs, limiting sugar in school foods, limiting vending machines to healthier options and prohibiting marketing of unhealthy foods?

Is your school system transparent on its menus and web site about the food it serves students?

Does your school system allow meaningful parent and community input into wellness policies and procedures?

The 2017 School Food Environment Grades can help answer these questions. Healthy School Food Maryland is a coalition of 19 local, statewide and national organizations and businesses working for whole, real, local and safe food for children in Maryland public school cafeterias. The grades are based on a rubric of 12 items with grades ranging from 0-4 for each item, with letter grades assigned based on a normal bell curve.

In our second year of issuing grades, we are glad to see that many school districts have responded with clear efforts to improve their school food offerings, policies and practices. The changes implemented will help students reach their highest potential for current and future health and academic achievement and will give parents the information they need to make informed decisions about their students’ participation in the school meal program.

With the changes required from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 fully implemented in most districts in the state (including offering a greater variety and more servings of fruits and vegetables, prohibitions on deep frying foods, requirements that grain-based foods be at least 50% whole grain, and restrictions on a la carte foods to bring them in line with nutritional standards for food served in meals), it is the right time to set continued goals for improvements for school food. With childhood obesity rates continuing to rise and ongoing gaps in achievement between students of different races and ethnicities, school food remains an important area to address these concerns. Scratch-cooked, local foods low in sugar, with a variety of nutritious options will help address urgent public health concerns as well as promote improved academic achievement, as was found in a study of the nutritional quality of school lunches in California schools. The rubric topics reflect these desires and concerns. Therefore, in most cases, meeting USDA school meal and a la carte regulations only earns a district a 1 or 2 out of 4 possible points in most rubric areas.

Grades on the rubric were determined based on communications with food service employees and members or leaders of School Health Councils or Wellness Committees in every Maryland school district between December 2017 and April 2018, analysis of web sites and wellness policies during that same period, analysis of elementary school lunch menus from November 2017, information from the 2015 USDA Farm to School Census (whose data is from 2013-2014), information provided by parents in some districts and calls directly to individual schools when we received conflicting information or no response from food service employees. After completing the rubrics, they were sent to the food service directors in each district for verification.
## Detailed School Food Environment Scores

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<th>Farm to school program</th>
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Rubric items grading scale: 0 low to 4 high

See 2016 grades rubric.
Rubric Detail

**A la Carte Transparency:** One of the most frustrating things for parents is discovering that their child, rather than eating school lunch, is using their lunch money to buy chips, cookies and ice cream sold a la carte, even at the elementary school level. These items rarely if ever appear on printed school lunch menus, but this year we were glad to see a 9-point increase in this category, with 12 districts attaining the highest grade of 4 for either not offering any a la carte foods (Baltimore City) or for listing all a la carte foods by brand name and flavor on the school food services web site (Anne Arundel, Baltimore County, Calvert, Carroll, Charles, Dorchester, Frederick, Harford, Howard, Saint Mary’s and Wicomico Counties).

**General Transparency:** Many parents take pains to limit certain ingredients (such as food dyes or added sugar) for their children, either due to concerns about allergies, sensitivities and weight, or in a general effort to eat clean label, nutritious, whole foods. However, it is often difficult or impossible to get information on the foods served in schools. Again, only one district reached the highest level of transparency of including full ingredient and nutrition facts labels for all their meal and a la carte foods (Anne Arundel County) but there was a 5-point increase in this area overall, indicating a trend towards increasing transparency.

**Vending Machines:** While federal Smart Snacks in Schools regulations now govern foods and drinks sold in vending machines from midnight until 30 minutes after the end of the school day, some districts have gone even further and require Smart Snacks compliance in their vending machines 24 hours a day. We commend Frederick, Howard, Kent, Queen Anne’s, Talbot, Washington and Wicomico Counties on taking this additional step. This category had an overall 2-point increase this year.

**Wellness Committees:** All counties surveyed had either a School Health Council or a Wellness Committee. Despite making this category more strict, there was a 5-point overall increase this year. Only Howard County reached the highest score of 4, which required full transparency about committee members, at least 50% non-school system employees and 25% parents, and the power to revise the wellness policy and/or procedures/regulations pending board/administration approval, a provision we added this year to discourage committees in name only. Howard County’s strong committee structure and function may be one reason for its excellent performance on the whole rubric, pointing to an important first step for any county wishing to excel in school health and wellness.

**Water and Water Bottles:** While most adults take for granted the right to have easy access to potable water, students in school often have to go to great lengths to find an accessible and safe source of drinking water. Federal law requires access to potable water in all cafeterias, but the state of Maryland allows for a drinking fountain in the hallway outside of the cafeteria, which in elementary schools often means having to raise your hand and get permission before getting water or waiting until after lunch to get a drink. Some individual schools even go so far
as to prohibit students from carrying personal water bottles. We were glad to see a
13-point increase in this area this year. Congratulations to Fredrick and Kent
Counties on obtaining the highest grade of 4, thanks to their wellness policies, which
expressly allow personal water bottles and require water bottles on school supply
lists.

Farm to School Programs: We changed this rubric area this year by eliminating
milk from the total farm to school percentage and reducing the rubric level
percentages accordingly, as well as removing the ability to receive a higher grade
for farm to school programming based on length of time. As a result, there was an
overall 19-point reduction in scores. Congratulations to school districts in Baltimore
City and Anne Arundel, Frederick, Howard and Saint Mary’s Counties for procuring
at least 20% of school food (excluding milk) locally. Howard County, however, was
the clear standout, with almost 50% of their food sourced locally.

Scratch Cooking: While larger counties with larger budgets may generally excel in
other categories, smaller counties had a chance to shine in this category, which may
be one of the most important in determining student satisfaction with meals. Based
on results from the 2016 grades, we decreased the percentage of scratch-cooked
meals required to receive a 4, but increased the percentages for grades 1-3, and
changed the rubric to pertain to scratch cooking of lunch entrées and not food
overall. There was an overall 14-point increase this year. Congratulations to school
districts in Calvert, Montgomery, Queen Anne’s and Somerset Counties for cooking
at least 40% of their meals from scratch, with special recognition to Baltimore City
and Allegany, Washington and Kent Counties for cooking at least 60% of their meals
from scratch. See scratch cooking meal examples given to districts.

Menu Variety and Repetition: In order to better reflect parent concerns about
repetition of “kid foods”, we changed this rubric area to reflect both variety and
repetition, limiting the highest score of 4 to districts that do not serve pizza more
than twice a week in secondary schools and once a week in elementary schools, or
French fries, hamburgers and hot dogs more than once a week at all levels. These
changes resulted in a 5-point decrease in this rubric area. Congratulations to
Allegany, Anne Arundel, Carroll and Harford Counties who not only offered more
than 30 different entrée choices on their elementary lunch menus for the month
sampled (November, 2017) but also limited repetition of “kid foods”, proving that
children will eat something other than pizza, burgers, hot dogs and fries, if offered.

Added Sugar: One of the least well-regulated areas in school food but of highest
concern to parents and public health advocates is added sugar, which is of
particular concern in school breakfasts and a la carte items. Unfortunately, we only
saw a 2-point increase in scores in this area this year. Howard, Cecil, Charles and
Talbot Counties stood out among their peers for policies limiting sugar more strictly
than the federal requirement of no more than 35% by weight. Only Kent County, however, explicitly limits added sugar by meal to 10% of total calories (per the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans) and Wicomico County requires that nutrition standards be based on those guidelines, rather than less stringent USDA standards.

**Salad Bars:** School food leaders around the country have begun using salad bars as a means of offering a fresh, healthy option to children while increasing their intake of fruits and vegetables, and in many cases, also increasing their bottom line due to higher meal participation. Recognizing that many smaller districts have not been able to afford salad bar equipment, we added the possibility of scoring 1 for cutting up apples and oranges at 50% of elementary schools or a score of 2 for 100% of schools and also decreased the required percentages of schools with salad bars at most rubric levels, resulting in an overall 21-point increase in this area. Recognition goes to Howard County for offering salad bars at all schools and to Anne Arundel County for either offering salad bars or a wide variety of fresh, cut up fruits and vegetables.

**Chemicals:** While the federal regulatory system for allowing new chemicals in the food supply fails to follow the precautionary principle or address a preponderance of scientific evidence that should preclude certain additives, consumer watchdog groups like Center for Science in the Public Interest have brought to the public’s attention the need for concern over many chemical additives commonly found in school foods, such as synthetic food dyes, artificial flavors and preservatives like BHA, BHT and TBHQ. There was a 6-point overall increase in this rubric area this year. Kudos to Kent and Montgomery Counties, the only school systems in the state that prohibit all artificial colors and some other dangerous additives, and to Kent County for including this prohibition in their “Wellness Through Healthy School Environments” policy.

**Food and Beverage Marketing:** A new federal rule required policy compliance in this area by the beginning of this school year. Most counties are now compliant, and despite this rubric area becoming more stringent, there was still an overall point increase of 3. One county’s wellness policy - Saint Mary’s County - however, stands out among its peers for expressly protecting children not just from food and beverage marketing but from the marketing of corporate brands unless every food or beverage product manufactured, sold or distributed under the corporate brand name is Smart Snacks compliant.

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**Acknowledgments**

Many thanks to Amelia Feng and Jenny Yang (Real Food for Kids - Montgomery interns) and Kathleen A. Gould Ed.D., M.A., R.D., L.D.N., Towson University and member of the Maryland Public Health Association, for completing the research for this year’s grades and Kenneth Weiss for the cover photo.

Issued May 8, 2018
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Healthy School Food
MARYLAND