

Students' lunches from home fall short

September 1 2014, by Jacqueline Mitchell

School lunch is a hot topic. Parents, administrators and policymakers are squaring off on federal guidelines requiring schools to serve healthier, more affordable and ecologically sustainable meals. No matter how they pan out, these guidelines won't apply to a sizable portion of the classroom. More than 40 percent of kids bring their lunch on any given day, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.

What's in those brown paper bags? Is the food brought from home of higher or lower quality than what the lunch lady serves?

That's what Jeanne Goldberg, G59, N86, a professor at the Friedman School, and her colleagues wanted to find out. In their recent study, the researchers peered inside the lunch boxes of third- and fourth-graders in 12 Massachusetts schools and assessed how the contents stacked up against the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Child and Adult Food Care Program (CAFCP) standards. These federal guidelines promote diets that include foods from five basic categories: vegetables, fruits, whole grains, lean proteins and dairy.

By these measures, most food brought from home fell short. Most kids brought a sandwich, a bottle of water and packaged snack food. That doesn't sound so bad until you consider that just 11 percent of lunches contained vegetables, and only 17 percent contained a dairy item. Only 3 percent of kids brought milk in as a beverage, while another 11 percent planned to purchase milk at [school](#). And even though the most common beverage in kids' lunch boxes was water, almost a quarter contained a

sugar-sweetened beverage. Taken together, just over a quarter of the home-packed lunches met three out five NSLP standards and only 4 percent of snacks met two out four CAFCP standards.

"Parents serve a lot of packaged foods," says Goldberg, director of the nutrition communication program at the Friedman School. "At the extreme, there were kids whose lunches contained four or five packages of snack foods with nothing at the core."

"The purpose of the study was not to criticize parents or make them feel like they've done a bad job," Goldberg says. Rather, the study is a first step toward improving the quality of home-packed lunches.

A Better Approach

Step one, she says, is toss that brown bag in favor of an insulated container. Kids who bring their lunches to school rarely have access to refrigerators or ovens. By lunchtime, "the cold food and the hot food had all reached room temperature, so they weren't very appetizing," Goldberg reports. That can raise questions of safety for some foods, too. "They do have much better chill packs these days, so there are ways to keep the food safe and tasty."

Goldberg also recommends exposing kids to new foods at home and recruiting them to help prepare their own lunches and snacks for the week. And she urges parents to remember that they are the ones in control. "Not everything will work the first time. But change over time is quite possible."

One last thing Goldberg recommends is a friendly note from a parent in the lunch box once in a while.

"That can be a real hit that gets lunch started on the right foot," she adds.

As far as Goldberg and her colleagues know, their study—published online in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*—is among the first to document the kinds of [food](#) U.S. school children bring from home. The results mirror those from other industrialized nations that show elementary students who bring lunch from home consume fewer fruits and vegetables and less fiber than their peers who buy school lunches. They are also more likely to consume sugar-sweetened beverages and snacks high in added sugar and fats while at school.

"It taught us a lot," says Goldberg. "It gave us some good direction about where we want to focus in terms of helping families do a better job. We're optimistic."

More information: Kristie L. Hubbard, Aviva Must, Misha Eliasziw, Sara C. Foltz, Jeanne Goldberg, "What's in Children's Backpacks: Foods Brought from Home," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, Volume 114, Issue 9, September 2014, Pages 1424-1431, ISSN 2212-2672, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2014.05.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2014.05.010).

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