

PA Milk Marketing Board
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Milk in Schools – Part 1

When did school lunches evolve to a situation where A LOT of food is thrown away each and every day? Have you talked to a school cafeteria worker or custodian about how much milk is thrown out every day? (It is not the fault of the school nutritionists; indeed, they struggle with balancing required items with student acceptability.)

When USDA estimates that more than 12 million children (17%) in the United States are food insecure, I would say those questions need to be answered. In FY 2020, the National School Lunch Program served 22.6 million children each day; 75.9 percent of those received free or reduced-price lunches. This was an increase of nearly three percent over FY 2019.

School meals must meet the nutritional guidelines established by USDA and it is the quality of the nutrition as much as the amount that has to be taken into consideration. And, by quality I mean nutrition density and whether it will actually be consumed by the student. USDA guidelines do a fairly good job with the nutrition density part of the equation, but not always the student consumption.

A study conducted by the Food Waste Warrior program found that as much as 45 million gallons of milk were wasted at a value of \$138 million in 2019. One interesting fact – students who could self-serve from a milk dispenser were less likely to waste milk than those served individual cartons. Those using the milk dispensers only took what they wanted. Hmmmm.....

Some other research findings to consider: When flavored milk was eliminated from school offerings, elementary student consumption dropped by 35 percent. More milk was also being thrown away when only white milk was offered. (MilkPep)

What is being thrown away with that carton of nonfat white milk? Protein, Omega 3, Calcium and Vitamin D to name a few. All of those are important nutrients for bone, brain, and other aspects of development of a growing child. Skim milk differs very little from whole milk in its overall nutrient density—except for its Omega 3 content. The more fat contained in milk, the higher its Omega 3 content. Skim milk contains only 2.6 mg of Omega 3 compared to whole milk with 183 mg.

Why is Omega 3 important? Omega 3 fatty acids are linked to many health benefits such as improved heart and brain health, and a lower risk of cancer. [Healthline](https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/17-health-benefits-of-omega-3#TOC_TITLE_HDR_15) (2018) reported 17 science-based benefits of Omega 3 fatty acids, a few of which I will list that I think are very important for child development: improved eye health, promotion of brain health, reduction of ADHD symptoms, reduced inflammation and fighting autoimmune diseases, and reduction of asthma. I probably should list all 17 of the benefits, but I think you get the picture. (See https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/17-health-benefits-of-omega-3#TOC_TITLE_HDR_15)

It seems to me that blaming whole or 2% milk consumption in schools for many childhood health issues is a flawed argument on several levels. The benefits of children actually drinking the milk in school as opposed to not choosing it, or wasting it, should be obvious.

There is no perfect solution. Concerns exist regarding sugar consumption in flavored milks. Past concerns centered on fat content of anything other than skim or 1% milk. The individuals making decisions about the school lunch program must consider all the science, particularly that related to benefits of milk consumption. If skim and 1% milk are being refused or wasted, no one benefits, leastwise the children.

I started off the article talking about the 17 percent of our children who are food insecure, many of whom depend on breakfast and lunch at school for their primary nutrition. Sensible decisions to provide them with quality foods they will choose and consume is the logical choice for me.

Next week I will present actual data on the amount of milk being sold to schools by Pennsylvania milk processors. To think that any of it is wasted is devastating.

PMMB supports milk in schools, particularly of the types that children will drink. Individual schools may find these types to be unique to their own students and we support districts having the flexibility to provide what their children will choose and consume. We are always available to respond to questions and concerns. I can be reached at 717-210-8244 and by email at chardbarge@pa.gov.