

## ALTERNATIVES TO FOOD REWARDS IN THE CLASSROOM

Food is commonly used to reward students for good behavior and academic performance. It's an easy, inexpensive and powerful tool to bring about immediate short-term behavior change. Yet, using food as reward has many negative consequences that go far beyond the short-term benefits of good behavior or performance, including:

- ⇒ Compromises classroom learning
- ⇒ Contributes to poor health and poor eating habits
- ⇒ Increases preference for sweets
- ⇒ Encourages overconsumption of unhealthy foods
- ⇒ Increases possibility of allergic reactions
- ⇒ Encourages need for and expectation of rewards after reaching accomplishments

Many schools and districts have found ways to be innovative with their budget and resources to offer non-food rewards for their schools, staff and students. Why is this so important? Well, we know from national research and local antidotes that **well-nourished and healthy students learn better**. Poor nutrition interferes with cognitive function and performance in the areas of language, concentration and attention, and is associated with lower academic achievement (CDC).

### DID YOU KNOW?

- \* According to the 2011 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, **21% of Colorado middle school students** and **24% of high school students** described themselves as **slightly or very overweight**.
- \* Across the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), of children born in 2000, **1 in 3 Caucasians and 1 in 2 African American and Hispanic children will have diabetes** before the end of their lifetime, most before 18 years of age.
- \* **Childhood obesity has more than tripled** in the past 30 years. Among 6-11 year olds, 33% are considered overweight and 17% are considered obese (CDC).



★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **IMAGINE** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

If every teacher gave an M&M in every class for every "right answer", the amount of candy a student consumes in a day adds up very quickly. It takes approximately 40 minutes of a quick pace on a treadmill to burn a small bag (approximately 50 pieces) of M&M's! And only 52% of Colorado students reported getting 60 minutes of physical activity a day for five of the last seven days (HKCS). **In one year, if you have one small bag per week, that's 13,000 calories. That's approxi-**

## SUPPORT:

In Colorado, there is legislation to support health and wellness efforts. In 2010, the Colorado Senate passed a bill **banning trans-fats** in schools. The bill ([SB 12-068](#)) prohibits public schools from making foods with industrial trans-fats available to students. This includes all food and beverages made available to a student on school grounds during each school day and extended school day, including:

- \* School cafeteria a la carte items
- \* School stores
- \* Vending machines
- \* Other food service entity existing upon school grounds
- \* **This also includes food or candy handed out by teachers in the classroom!**



Colorado also, for the first time, has Comprehensive Health and Physical Education (CHPE) Content Standards. These standards are to be met in every school, grades K-12, in Colorado and promote **1. Movement Competence and Understanding; 2. Physical and Personal Wellness; 3. Emotional and Social Wellness; 4. Prevention and Risk Management**. Schools are finding ways to meet and implement the CHPE standards. They are creating and promoting a healthy environment, offering healthy options throughout the school day and promoting common messaging that reiterates the objectives of the standards.

There are schools and districts throughout Colorado that are committed to efforts of implementing healthy environments. They are overcoming barriers and showing what's possible! For instance:



## URBAN EXAMPLES:

**Health is Not Cost Prohibited!** Greeley School District RE-6, located in Greeley, CO, serves 19,623 students, 60% of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Greeley's nutrition services department has allocated funds from their general operating budget to offer FREE non-food rewards to be available throughout the year for teachers to request. This ensures consistency with nutrition education and policy and the nutritional value of all food served at school, including food rewards in the classroom. This also allows teachers to save money from their own pockets. Part of Greeley's motivation, there are plenty of opportunities for students to enjoy sweets; why does school have to be one of those places? For many students, this may be the only one or two meals they get during the day; we need to make those meals and snacks as nutritious and healthy as possible.

**Some Classroom Rewards Increase Learning and are Free!** Aurora Public Schools (APS), located in Aurora, CO, serves approximately 40,000 students, 65% of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Aurora's Chief Academic Officer encouraged all APS principals to encourage and allow brain breaks in the classroom at all levels. At least one member from every school received training on the relevance, importance, and strategies for implementing brain breaks (or physical activity breaks) in the classroom. These members repeated the training for their entire corresponding school staff. Now, throughout the district, teachers are rewarding students by allowing them to choose their own brain break activity. The entire class or individual students are allowed 1 -5 minutes to perform their favorite brain break as a reward for good behavior, attentiveness, correct answers, etc. The students love the activities and their brains are being recharged to learn.

## RURAL EXAMPLE:

**Getting Creative and Working as a Community!** East Grand School District, located in rural Granby, CO, has approximately 1,325 students, 22% of whom receive free and reduced lunch. It has been the wellness team's challenge in each of the buildings over that last few years to find ways to motivate and challenge staff to incorporate opportunities to integrate healthy education, healthy nutrition and physical activity into their schedules in a non-intrusive way. The team has provided staff with resources, tools, and professional development that shows them ways to implement strategies in an already full day. By encouraging and modeling healthy eating habits, creating classroom snacking policies, and engaging in "fun" activity breaks, their students are happier and healthier. The health teams have also found creative ways to sustain their efforts by enlisting their community and school parent groups to assist in their programs. For example, asking classroom parents for their help in providing healthy or non-food treats. The days of "candy" and "cupcakes" in the classroom are few and far between; instead parents are teaming up to bring bags of non-food and healthy food items. It takes a "whole team" to meet the ever growing challenges and finding healthy solutions.

## SO...WHAT CAN YOU DO?

### ★ Administrators:

- \* Create awareness, set expectations and communicate with your staff on health and wellness efforts.
- \* Listen to concerns and talk to your staff.
- \* Set a good example by removing the candy jars from your office.
- \* Remind teachers that stickers are cheaper than food.
- \* Share lists of non-food reward options.
- \* Provide a treasure box of alternative reward items for teachers to give to students.
- \* Offer opportunities for recognition for staff that implement healthy efforts.
- \* Offer opportunities for school-wide wellness efforts.
- \* To gain support from the community, teachers and administrators can send letters home to parents.  
[\(Click here for a Parent Letter Template.\)](#)
- \* Remember to list classroom and resource needs in the letter for parents' contribution and participation.

### ★ Parents:

- \* Support your school.
- \* Donate used or new non-food rewards.
- \* Support common messaging of the CHPE Standards to your children at home. ([Click here for ideas at home.](#))
- \* Start or join a wellness team at your child's school.

### ★ Students:

- \* Give your school and teachers ideas on what you would like as non-food rewards.
- \* Become advocates for your own health.
- \* Write thank you notes for teachers that make efforts to create or promote a healthy environment.

### ★ Superintendent/Board Members:

- \* Pass wellness policies for your district that follow state and federal legislation.
- \* Support principals in requiring a healthy environment.
- \* Promote and communicate common messaging about the CHPE Standards.

### ★ Teachers:

- \* Garner and get support from administration, wellness staff, PE teachers, parents, students and the medical community for how and what to implement in your classroom.
- \* Set the expectation and send common messages about the CHPE Standards.
- \* Take time to become familiar with the standards.



Schools can help promote a healthy learning environment by using non-food rewards. The ideas below are little to ZERO COST ALTERNATIVES that can be modified for different ages. Be creative and don't forget to engage student voice!

## Elementary School Students

- \* High five/words of encouragement or happy note
- \* Student's choice – [Physical Activity/Brain Break](#)
- \* Make deliveries to office
- \* Teach class
- \* Sit by friends
- \* Go to lunch/line up first
- \* Eat lunch with teacher or principal
- \* Eat lunch outdoors with the class
- \* Have class or read outdoors
- \* Have lunch or breakfast in the classroom
- \* Private lunch in classroom with a friend
- \* Be a helper in another classroom
- \* Certificates
- \* Watch a video
- \* Extra recess time with a friend or as a class
- \* Walk with the principal or teacher
- \* Trip to treasure box filled with nonfood items
- \* Dance to favorite music in the classroom
- \* Show-and-tell
- \* Earn play money for privileges
- \* Teacher or volunteer reads special book to class
- \* Teacher performs special skill (singing, cart wheel, guitar playing, etc.)
- \* Have extra art time
- \* Have "free choice" time at end of the day or end of class period
- \* Help the teacher
- \* Take care of the class animal or mascot for the day
- \* Be "Student of the Day"
- \* Get extra computer time
- \* Play a favorite game or puzzle
- \* Listen with headset to a book on audiotape
- \* Items that can only be used on special occasions (special art supplies, computer games, toys)

This is not just for  
primary grades!

## Middle School Students

- \* High five/words of encouragement or happy note
- \* Sit with friends
- \* Listen to music while working at desk
- \* Five-minute chat break at end of class
- \* Student's choice – [Physical Activity/Brain Break](#)
- \* Reduced homework or late homework pass
- \* Extra credit
- \* Fun video/joke
- \* Fun brainteaser activities
- \* Extra computer time
- \* Assemblies
- \* Field trips
- \* Eat lunch outside or have class outside
- \* Choose a class activity
- \* Take care of the class animal for the day
- \* Get "free choice" time at the end of the day
- \* Walk outside or read outdoors
- \* Eat lunch outdoors with the class
- \* Play a computer game
- \* Help out in another classroom

## High School Students

- \* High five/words of encouragement
- \* Sit by friends
- \* 5 minute chat break at end of class
- \* Student's choice – [Physical Activity/Brain Break](#)
- \* Extra credit or bonus points
- \* Fun video/joke
- \* Reduced homework
- \* Late homework pass
- \* Donated coupons to video stores, music stores, or movies
- \* Drawings for donated prizes among students who meet certain grade standards
- \* Walk outside or read outdoors
- \* Get "free choice" time at the end of the day
- \* Extra computer time
- \* Listen to music while working

## RECOGNITION:

- \* Recognize student's achievement during school wide announcements and/or on the school's website.
- \* Recognize a teacher's achievement in implementing health and wellness strategies during school wide announcements, staff meetings and/or on the school or district's website.
- \* Create a photo recognition board.
- \* Write a note to the student commending the achievement.
- \* Phone, email or write a letter to parents/guardians.



## SCHOOL-WIDE IDEAS:

- \* Ask open-ended questions to your students as to what they want as a reward for a job well done. Use classroom time to discuss nutrition, healthy foods, and healthy school behaviors.
- \* Hold a contest for elementary and middle school students focused on inventing fun and creative ideas for classroom incentives. Select five student winners. Print, bind and distribute the winning ideas to the teachers in your school district. Allow teachers to give additional ideas. [Click here for more lesson plans.](#)
- \* Celebrate success with school-wide assemblies.
- \* Partner with existing PBIS Systems.



**Bank System** — Children can be given fake money, tokens, stars, or a chart can be used to keep track of the points they have earned. Points can be exchanged for privileges or prizes when enough are accumulated. 

A point system also may be used for an entire class to earn a reward. Whenever individual children have done well, points can be added to the entire class' account. When the class has earned a target number of points, then they receive a group reward.

### Nonfood Rewards:

- School supplies
- Stickers
- Magnets
- Chalk
- Coloring Book
- Bouncy Ball
- Sunglasses
- Paperback Book



### Group Awards:

- PA Game ([Physical Activity/Brain Break](#))
- Class lunch
- Class music time/dance party
- Reading Outside
- Free Time
- Early Release



### Sources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

[http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/hsmrs/Connecticut/Food\\_As\\_Reward.pdf](http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/hsmrs/Connecticut/Food_As_Reward.pdf)

Alsiö J, Olszewski PK, Levine AS, Schiöth HB. Feed-forward mechanisms: Addiction-like behavioral and molecular adaptations in over-eating. *Frontiers in Neuroendocrinology*, 10.1016/j.yfrne.2012.01.002. Available online 2012 Jan 28.





Log on to [connect.coloradoedinitiative.org/healthyschools](http://connect.coloradoedinitiative.org/healthyschools) and share what works!

Let us know your strategies to motivate students so we can share with others.

For more information on a healthy school environment,  
contact Amy Dyett, Health and Wellness Director,  
[adyett@coloradoedinitiative.org](mailto:adyett@coloradoedinitiative.org) or (303) 736-6477.

The Colorado Education Initiative

1660 Lincoln St.

Suite 2000

Denver, CO 80264



THE  
COLORADO  
EDUCATION  
INITIATIVE