

# NCCDPHP Success Story

## Northwest Arkansas Schools Offer Lower-Sodium Choices, More Fruits and Veggies

*By Jill Niemeier*

### Public Health Challenge

High sodium intake is associated with high blood pressure, which can lead to heart disease and stroke, the first and fourth leading causes of death in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that nearly 9 in 10 children consume more sodium than the recommended limit of 2,300 mg per day. School nutrition is critical to child health and well-being because children aged 5-18 consume more than 50% of their daily caloric intake in schools; it is especially critical to low-income students who tend to rely on school food more than others. In two Northwest Arkansas school districts where 70% and 40% of students receive free or reduced-price meals, healthy school environments are crucial. Improving the school environment can improve long-term outcomes and risks for heart disease, particularly among children that are already at risk.

### Approach

School lunch programs are important sites for nutrition interventions because many children rely on school lunches for their nutrition. UAMS Northwest partnered with two local school districts with a combined population of nearly 24,500 students to implement the Smarter Lunchrooms program, which encourages the use of free or low-cost evidence-based strategies to increase consumption of healthier foods and reduce food waste. Smarter Lunchrooms was used as a foundation to begin engaging with school nutrition directors about simple ways to lower sodium in meals by introducing more fruits and vegetables. Schools used the Smarter Lunchrooms Scorecard to assess current offerings and make changes.



### At A Glance

The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Northwest partnered with two Northwest Arkansas school districts to implement Smarter Lunchrooms strategies. Smarter Lunchrooms provides low- or no-cost strategies based on behavioral economics principles to encourage students to choose and eat healthier foods. To help implement these strategies, UAMS Northwest designed and developed trainings and resources for school nutrition staff with special focus on reducing sodium in the entrées and sides that they serve.

*The goal, of course, is to provide an atmosphere in the cafeteria that promotes healthy choices for students. Overall, I think [the Smarter Lunchrooms Scorecard] is a great tool to motivate change for our students and staff.*

- Gena Smith, Child Nutrition Director, Springdale Public School

## Results

UAMS Northwest engaged 34 schools from two districts to participate in Smarter Lunchrooms. UAMS conducted 16 trainings with school nutrition staff focused on strategies to reduce sodium in lunch entrees, arranging and displaying fruits and vegetables, and knife skills to cut fresh fruits and vegetables to be more appetizing. Food preparation was included in the trainings. For example, one training focused on how to make low-sodium salsas using commonly purchased products, which corresponds with a Smarter Lunchrooms strategy of pairing raw vegetables with a low-fat option like salsa. Additionally, packaged salads or salad bars are now available to students at participating schools, with accompanying signage to encourage healthier choices. From baseline to year 2, sodium was reduced by 8.2% per entrée offered and by 5.3% per entrée served.

## What's Next

UAMS Northwest plans to expand partnerships to more school districts in Northwest Arkansas. Plans are in place to add the Bentonville Public School District, which will add 25 new schools to the program. In addition to new partnerships, work will continue with Springdale and Farmington schools to further implement the Smarter Lunchrooms strategies. To expand the program in existing and new districts, UAMS Northwest is developing more nutrition education resources and has several more trainings planned, including a salad bar training for Farmington and a whole grain bar training for Springdale.

## Find Out More

To learn more about Smarter Lunchrooms and access trainings, resources, and other information, visit [www.smarterlunchrooms.org](http://www.smarterlunchrooms.org). This project is managed by the UAMS Community Health and Research Healthy Food Systems team and is supported by CDC's Sodium Reduction in Communities Program. The Community Health and Research team at UAMS Northwest is leading the way through evidence-based research and community programs to help our community overcome barriers to quality health.

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## Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

### Web site

<http://nccd.cdc.gov/nccdsuccessstories/>

### CDC-INFO

<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/dcs/ContactUs/Form>

The findings and conclusions in this success story are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funding agencies or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



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