

Ms. Luisa Santos, Board Member

Co-Sponsors:

Ms. Maria Teresa Rojas, Chair
Mr. Roberto J. Alonso
Dr. Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall
Dr. Steve Gallon III

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SUBJECT: FOOD FOR THE FUTURE POLICY FRAMEWORK

COMMITTEE: PERSONNEL, STUDENT, SCHOOL & COMMUNITY SUPPORT

**LINK TO STRATEGIC
PLAN:
ENVIRONMENTS**

SAFE, HEALTHY, & SUPPORTIVE LEARNING

**INFORMED, ENGAGED, & EMPOWERED STAKEHOLDERS
RELEVANT, RIGOROUS, & INNOVATIVE ACADEMICS
EFFECTIVE & SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PRACTICES**

Promoting the physical, emotional, and mental health of students and employees is an identified priority in our M-DCPS Strategic Plan, *Pillar II: Safe, Healthy, & Supportive Learning Environments*.¹ As the third-largest school district in the nation, M-DCPS has established itself as a leader in protecting the health and well-being of over 337,172 students and 41,000 employees and serving over 200,000 meals at 359 schools daily.² Over the past three academic years, student satisfaction with school meals has shown a gradual increase, though overall sentiment remains low. In 2022–2023, 30% of surveyed M-DCPS students agreed that cafeteria food 'looks and tastes good.' This percentage rose to 33% in the 2023-2024 academic year and 35% in the 2024-2025 academic year, demonstrating that our progress must continue.³ M-DCPS is a natural setting to help prevent childhood obesity and related health consequences, support healthy development, and improve academic performance districtwide in compliance with the USDA's Child Nutrition Program and nutrition standards for school meals.

Childhood obesity is a growing health crisis in the U.S., with 17% of the U.S. now obese.⁴ Student Health Data Summaries between 2021 and 2023 demonstrate a small decrease in childhood obesity in M-DCPS, with 18.30% of students reported as obese using BMI percentile in 2021-2022 and 17.64% in 2022-2023.^{5,6} Roughly 67% of children's calories come from ultra-processed foods, which are linked to obesity, chronic diseases, and rising mental health

¹ Miami-Dade County Public Schools. (2021). 2021 – 2026 Strategic Plan Action Steps. <https://mainapi.dadeschools.net/resources/DADESCHOOLS/Misc/M1377%20-%20Attachment%20-%20Infinite%20Possibilities.%202021-2026%20Strategic%20Plan%20Action%20Steps.pdf>

² Specialized Task Force to Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards. (2025). Staff Follow-Up School Board Meeting of November 20, 2024, Agenda Item H-7: Proposal to Establish a Specialized Task Force to Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards.

³ Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis. (n.d.). *Miami-Dade School Climate Surveys Results*. Miami-Dade County Public Schools. <https://drs2.dadeschools.net/#/rightColumn/3603>

⁴ National Survey of Children's Health. (2024). *Explore childhood obesity related data by demographic*. State of Childhood Obesity. <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/demographic-data/ages-6-17/>

⁵ DeSantis, R., Ladapo, J. A., Florida Department of Health, & Division of Community Health Promotion. (2023). School Health Services Program data summaries School year 2022-2023 [Report].

⁶ State of Florida. (2021). 2021-2022 State of Florida school health services. In Florida Department of Health, & Division of Community Health Promotion.

issues.⁷⁸ Children are, for the first time, projected to have shorter life expectancies than their parents.⁹ We must continue to explore the best ways to meet the nutritional needs of students, provide school food that enhances academic performance, and support healthy lifelong eating habits through explicit nutrition education.

The M-DCPS School Board and District have shown their commitment to providing high-quality and sustainable food choices that support the physical health of students and employees. As per M-DCPS Food and Nutrition Procedures and according to School Board Policy 8500 – Food Services: *“The Food and Nutrition service program shall strive to: (1) provide school food services consistent with the nutritional needs of students, and (2) provide school food services that contribute to the student’s educational experiences and the development of desirable eating habits.”*¹⁰ Because nutritious school meals are a prerequisite for learning, the M-DCPS Department of Food and Nutrition provides breakfast and lunch offered at no cost to students through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) under the USDA’s Child Nutrition Program. The NSLP was established by the National School Lunch Act, passed by Congress in 1946.¹¹ It was amended in 1962 and funded in 1966 to provide free or reduced-price lunches to qualifying students. The NSLP aligns its meal patterns with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, including those from the 2020-2025 guidelines. Since the District opted into the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) in 2022, all M-DCPS students have access to breakfast and lunch at school at no cost, with many relying on them as a primary source of daily nutrition.

The Department of Food and Nutrition continues to move forward with the Lean & Green initiative to provide healthy meals for students in a friendly and clean environment. This encompasses providing vegetarian menu choices and participating in nutrition education and partnerships that provide wellness resources and programming to elevate the district’s sustainability pillar. Local partnerships include program sourcing locally grown produce through the Farm to School program to be utilized in the preparation of school meals and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program grant. Access to edible gardens and food forests is provided through the Education Fund, a community partner. Through this partnership, the garden-to-cafeteria initiative has provided students with access to fresh harvest from the school garden integrated into school meals and standardized recipes.

As part of the district’s sustainability initiatives, the department promotes Plastic-Free Lunch Day and Earth Day to reduce single-use plastics and raise environmental awareness among students and staff. Additionally, the Share Table initiative allows students to place unwanted non-perishable food items for redistribution among their peers, helping to minimize food waste in the cafeteria. For the past 15 years, the department has been using compostable plates that do not contain PFAS and continues to explore the use of sustainable paper goods.

These efforts align with, and are in some cases the result of, the directives set forth by our School Board, including but not limited to: Agenda Item H-16, Foods Rich in Fiber, proffered by Dr. Marta Pérez (November 14, 2017); Agenda Item H-4, Edible Landscaping, proffered by Dr. Marta Pérez (October 4, 2018); Agenda Item H-3, Elimination of Food Waste and the Exploration of Food Sharing Programs, proffered by Dr. Steve Gallon III (April 11, 2019); Agenda Item H-4, The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, Approve the Endorsement of September 2020 as National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, proffered by Ms. Susie V. Castillo (August 27, 2020); Agenda Item H-19, Endorsement of and Participation in Activities for National Nutrition Month® and National School Breakfast Week and Recognition of

⁷ Wang, L., Martínez Steele, E., Du, M., Pomeranz, J. L., O’Connor, L. E., Herrick, K. A., Luo, H., Zhang, X., Mozaffarian, D., & Zhang, F. F. (2021). Trends in consumption of ultra processed foods among US youths aged 2-19 years, 1999-2018. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 326(6). <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2021.10238>

⁸ Lane, M. M., Gamage, E., Du, S., Ashtree, D. N., McGuinness, A. J., Gauci, S., Baker, P., Lawrence, M., Rebholz, C. M., Srour, B., Touvier, M., Jacka, F. N., O’Neil, A., Segasby, T., & Marx, W. (2024). Ultra-processed food exposure and Adverse Health Outcomes: Umbrella Review of epidemiological meta-analyses. *British Medical Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmi-2023-077310>

⁹ National Center for Health Statistics. (2022a, August 31). *Life expectancy in the U.S. dropped for the second year in a row in 2021*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/20220831.htm

¹⁰ Miami-Dade County Public Schools. (2024). Food and Nutrition Procedures. <https://api.dadeschools.net/WMSFiles/17/24-25%20Procedures/A/A-1%20Program%20Authority.pdf>

¹¹ Program history. National CACFP Sponsors Association. (2024, December 20). <https://www.cacfp.org/program-history/>

Extraordinary Work Performed by Food and Nutrition Employees, proffered by Ms. Lucia Baez-Geller (February 10, 2021); Agenda Item H-9, Food Waste in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), proffered by Ms. Luisa Santos (approved by the Board on October 11, 2023); Agenda Item H-7, Proposal to Establish a Task Force to Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards, proffered by Mr. Roberto J. Alonso (November 13, 2024); Agenda Item H-6, Exploring a Potential Partnership to Bring Local and Fresh Fruits and Produce to Our School Cafeterias, proffered by Mr. Roberto J. Alonso (approved by the Board on April 16, 2025).

As a result of Board Member Alonso's item in November 2024, the Specialized Task Force to *Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards* provided recommendations to enhance food offerings in our schools. At the local level, the Specialized Task Force called for the elimination of fruit juice from our school meal program, engagement of student voice in developing meal options, and providing continuous feedback. On a national level, they recommend the USDA prohibit food dye, provide funding for nutrition education in the classroom, re-evaluate breakfast guidelines to prohibit two grains at breakfast, reclassify starchy vegetables (i.e., corn, potatoes, and peas), and require whole grains for all grain products.¹²

We must be data-driven, scale our innovative initiatives, and proactively evolve as nutritional educators and food providers for students. National research, USDA Nutrition Standards for School Meals, recommendations produced by the Specialized Task Force to *Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards*, community requests, and initiatives developed by the M-DCPS Food and Nutrition Department point to the necessity for the "Food for the Future Food Policy Framework," composed of the following four pillars:

1. **Improve Student Health Through Balanced Nutrition:** Students and employees must have access to water dispensers in our cafeterias and menus that feature reduced sugar, whole carbs, healthy fats, and minimal processing.
2. **Support Local and Sustainable Food Sources:** Students and employees must have access to fresh and local foods, and cafeterias that minimize waste.
3. **Foster Student Engagement and Nutrition Literacy:** Students and employees must be continuously involved in menu development and feedback mechanisms and engaged in nutrition education.
4. **Accountability:** M-DCPS must continuously review and regularly report qualitative and quantitative metrics to assess the success of our initiatives.

This item seeks the Board's approval to request that the Superintendent conduct a comprehensive review of current school nutrition practices aligned with the "Food for the Future Policy Framework," as described in this item and to present findings and recommendations at a School Board workshop.

This item has been reviewed and approved by the Office of the General Counsel as to form and legal sufficiency.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY
MS. LUISA SANTOS:**

The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida directs the Superintendent to:

1. conduct a comprehensive review of current school nutrition practices aligned to the "Food for the Future Policy Framework", including but not limited to:

¹² Specialized Task Force to Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards. (2025). Staff Follow-Up School Board Meeting of November 20, 2024. Agenda Item H-7: Proposal to Establish a Specialized Task Force to Evaluate the District's Food Program, Federal Child Nutrition Guidelines, and Food Safety Standards.

- a. Long-term nutrition goals that reduce reliance on ultra-processed foods and prioritize whole ingredients, scratch cooking, healthy fats, and reduced sugar to support student well-being, learning, and development; and
 - b. Result of operational reviews to assess each school's ability to provide dishwashing services and reusable service ware during meal periods, catalogue and map all filtered-water dispensing stations available to students and staff during meal times, reports of the volume (in pounds) of cafeteria waste generated at each school, including disposal methods; and
 - c. A description of district capacity to increase access to locally grown food and partnerships that reduce food waste through composting, food donations, and previously implemented sustainability initiatives including Share Tables; and
 - d. An assessment of District capacity to design and deploy an online dashboard to track, compare, and publicly report student health metrics (BMI percentiles, incidence of Type II diabetes, blood pressure, etc.) against state and national benchmarks, aggregated qualitative and quantitative student feedback (meal participation counts by type, climate survey, etc.), nutritional composition of served meals, and key sustainability indicators; and
 - e. A report of the opportunities for all students to share feedback on menu items and food quality, and the relevant state standards pertaining to nutrition education programs across the K-12 curriculum; and
 - f. Evaluate facility, equipment, and staffing requirements across the district to support implementation of the above initiatives, including necessary capital and operational investments; and
2. present findings and recommendations at a School Board workshop no later than October 30, 2025.