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Fresh produce, local ingredients and balanced portion sizes are among the key components of a healthy meal. With that in mind, Saint Paul Public Schools Nutrition Services is stepping up its menu offerings this September by implementing new U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutritional guidelines.

"Childhood obesity in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. According to a study in the New England Journal of Medicine, the current generation of school-aged children may not outlive their parents," said Jean Ronnei, Director, Nutrition & Custodial Services for Saint Paul Public Schools. "We don't want Saint Paul Public School kids to be part of that sad statistic.

"These changes can go a long way toward fostering healthy eating habits, but we also want parents to join us by duplicating these positive changes at home."

For the 2012-2013 school year, Saint Paul Public School students can expect to see more options -including locally grown fruits and vegetables - on the Choice Bar, which allow students to choose meal accompaniments from a variety of healthy options. Menus will also feature fewer starches and right-sized individual serving portions.

To help guide students in building a balanced plate, schools will also offer:

- All-you-care-to-eat fruit and veggie "Choice Bars"
- Meals with fewer calories, less fat and less sodium
- Leaner proteins, with more meat-free alternatives
- Right-sized portions of more satisfying foods
- More whole-grain options

Since many students eat two meals a day at school, Saint Paul Public Schools serve nutritious options for both breakfast and lunch. All district schools offer free breakfast for students each school day. For all meals, suggested calorie ranges have been taken into account based on students' grade level. In addition, the schools have made it a priority to incorporate a variety of local offerings into the meals, including seasonal fruits and veggies, Minnesota-produced honey and chicken drumsticks.

"Our goal is to set kids up to grow into healthy adults by reducing their risk of chronic disease and promoting overall health," Ronnei added.

To learn more about healthy eating, visit <http://www.choosemyplate.gov>. For more information about Saint Paul Public Schools Nutrition Services and the USDA guidelines, visit <http://ns.spps.org>.