



Congratulations! Vegan Lunches for Country's Second-Largest Public School District

By Neal Barnard, MD, FACC
May 23 2017

[embed]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfldZRAqiB0[/embed]

Congratulations to the Los Angeles Unified School District! Earlier this month, school board members unanimously voted in favor of bringing healthful plant-based options to L.A. schools next fall in a pilot program championed by students, parents, and doctors. Lila Copeland, an inspiring 15-year-old LAUSD student, launched the campaign back in 2016. Before board members made their decision, I joined Lila and other LAUSD students in offering a testimony about the importance of this initiative.

Adding vegan options is a tremendous step toward keeping students healthy, but removing unhealthful foods from the menu is equally important. That's why the Physicians Committee recently [filed a lawsuit](#) to stop LAUSD and Poway Unified School District, also in California, from serving students processed meats—including hot dogs, pepperoni, and luncheon meat—which are linked to colorectal cancer.

We're still working on getting processed meats out of LAUSD. But in the meantime, read my testimony that helped get vegan options in:

I am Neal Barnard, M.D., Adjunct Associate Professor of Medicine at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., President of the Physicians Committee, and Fellow of the American College of Cardiology.

Thank you for considering giving students access to healthful plant-based foods. There is always controversy whenever you talk about food, of course, but this is a great idea, and you really deserve accolades for it.

This is actually important for every student—not just those who are already looking for vegan choices, but for every student. Students who have a chance to try plant-based meals gain familiarity with the most healthful foods—completely free of animal fat and cholesterol, and rich in vitamins, fiber, and protein in its most

healthful form. And they set the stage for healthy habits in the future.

And those who take advantage of plant-based choices at every meal are adopting the healthiest possible eating pattern. As you know, plant-based diets have been recognized by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and by the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee for their health benefits.

Plus, plant-based meals are sometimes the cheapest, because they can be built from beans, rice, and other simple ingredients.

Some people who are not familiar with plant-based diets may ask if they provide adequate nutrition. The fact is they provide better nutrition than is typical of most American diets. Plant-based foods are rich in vitamins, minerals, and healthful fiber, and provide more than enough protein, without the animal fat and cholesterol that children do not need. Meats do have protein and iron, but plant-based diets have more than enough of both in more healthful forms. Dairy products do have calcium, but greens and beans do, too, in a more absorbable form. Meats and dairy products have no fiber and are poor sources of many vitamins, and they tend to push healthful vegetables and fruits off the plate. That's why plant-based diets stack up much better on structured nutrition rating systems, such as Harvard's Alternative Healthy Eating Index.

This initiative shows you really care about your students—all your students. Studies show that children who grow up with plant-based foods have much less risk of becoming overweight as adults. And in a 2009 study, nearly 8 percent of people following typical American diets had diabetes. For people following vegan diets, that figure was just 2.9 percent, and they are also much less likely to develop heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, and certain cancers.

If children are unfamiliar with plant-based options and never learned the taste of a meal without cheese and meat,

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they have one arm tied behind their backs.

Many students have learned that the United Nations and other authorities have called for reducing consumption of meat, dairy products, and animal products in general for the sake of the environment. They understand that beef and dairy cows belch methane into the atmosphere, and that raising feed for chickens, pigs, and other animals consumes an enormous amount of water and fertilizer. When schools ignore these considerations, students feel they are living among climate change deniers. Every student needs a healthy, plant-based option accessible every day.

And there is more to it. The majority of people of color have trouble digesting lactose—the milk sugar—which can then cause bloating and diarrhea. This is not a disease; it's the biological norm. By the teen years, many children have symptoms that can get in the way of studying, athletic performance, and day-to-day activities. Dairy-free meals and beverages should be available for all children, without forcing them to get a doctor's note for what is a perfectly normal condition.

While you do your wonderful work making sure that children are as well-equipped as possible for what life has in store for them, the greatest threats they will face come from physical problems—overweight, heart disease, diabetes, and others. So if your son or daughter were to say, "I'd like to bring more plant-based meals into my life," or "I really want to help the environment," or "I want to be compassionate in my eating choices with your help," I hope your answer will be a resounding "Yes!"