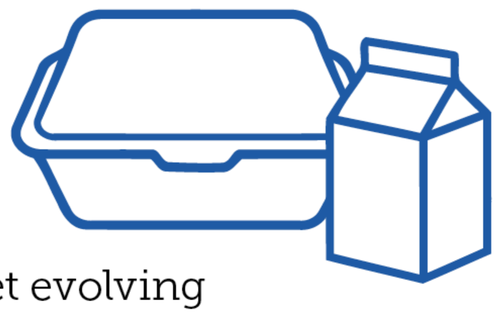
SMALL MENU CHANGES, BIG NUTRITION IMPACT

Lessons from the SMART SWAPS Pilot

What Is SMART SWAPS?



The **SMART SWAPS** initiative was developed to address the challenges school nutrition professionals face as they work to meet evolving meal standards—while still serving kid-friendly, appealing meals that keep students excited about school food. Our goal is to be informative and provide easy-prep recipes that save on time and labor!

SMART SWAPS In Action:

During the 2025-2026 school year, a **SMART SWAPS** pilot was implemented at 22 on-site school kitchens serving 14,380 students with Chartwells K-12 in the Rochester Community School District (MI). Breakfast menus were adjusted to align with upcoming 2027-2028 nutrition standards for reduced added sugar and sodium. Additionally, more menu options with higher protein were introduced while student favorites were preserved.



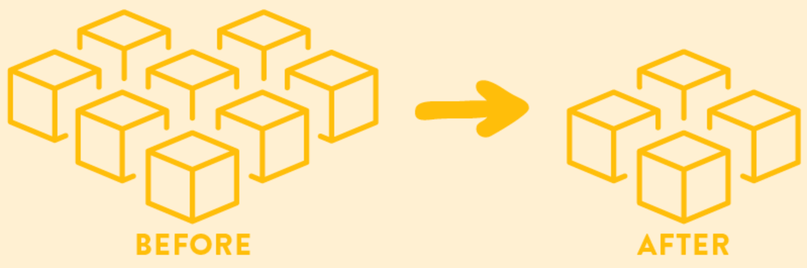
Real Results

Flavored Milk Stayed on the Menu

Flavored milk offered in schools has been reformulated with less added sugar and can fit within menus designed to reduce added sugar. As a result, milk selection patterns remained stable throughout the pilot.

Added Sugar Reduced

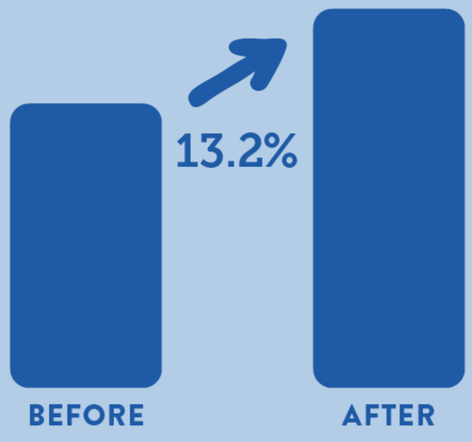
Menu changes reduced added sugar by ~8-9g per breakfast.



That's ~3.5 lbs. per student annually[1].

Protein Increased

When lower-added-sugar options were offered, students selected more protein. Overall selection of protein items rose by 13.2%[1].



Participation Stabilized

- **Initial participation dip among younger students**
- **Then participation leveled off**
- **No continued decline as students adapted to menu changes**



1. ***Smart Swaps Pilot Report***, April 2026

Why SMART SWAPS Works



Feasible for operators

Practical recipe modifications use common school ingredients and equipment while taking labor needs into consideration.



Aligned with school meal standards

It improves nutrition quality while supporting evolving meal guidelines.



Built on familiar foods

Students still see foods they recognize and enjoy like breakfast sandwiches and flavored milk.

Keys for Success:

What We Know About Student Preferences

- **GRADUAL CHANGE MATTERS.** Phased transitions helped limit participation losses compared to abrupt menu overhauls.
- **GRAB-AND-GO FORMATS ARE HIGHLY PREFERRED.**
- **ADOPTION TAKES REPETITION.** Students typically need 3+ exposures before embracing a new item.
- **CHANGE IS HARD ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS.** Start early and begin introducing changes slowly.
- **SAMPLING BUILDS FAMILIARITY.** Exposure at breakfast or lunch can help increase comfort with new options.

Start Swapping EASY AS 1-2-3



Begin Early

Introduce changes gradually to give students time to adapt and get comfortable with new options.



Make it Familiar

Choose items that feature simple flavors and are easy to grab and go.



Lead With Protein

Use familiar, protein-forward options as a starting point to support both student satisfaction and nutrition goals.







PROVEN IN SCHOOLS. PRACTICAL IN ANY DISTRICT.

Visit SMART-SWAPS.COM to find kid-tested recipes and sample menus.

MAINE DAIRY & NUTRITION COUNCIL