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**Industry Viewpoint: The power of produce in back-to-school nutrition**

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By

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The beginning of a new school year isn't just about hitting the books, it's also an ideal time to emphasize the importance of healthy eating habits for everyone — from students to parents. A balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables is key to fueling success in both the classroom and in daily life.

A breakfast rich in fruits, vegetables, protein and whole grains is key for young minds. This combination provides the brain with essential nutrients that enhance focus, memory and academic performance. The antioxidants and vitamins found in fruits and vegetables also play a significant role in mood regulation, helping to stabilize emotions and reduce anxiety, which is especially important for students as a new school year begins.

Carrying this nutritional balance into lunch is equally important. Incorporating produce at lunchtime sustains energy levels, preventing the dreaded afternoon slump to help children stay alert and engaged throughout the day.

**Early food preferences, shaped during childhood, have a lasting impact on health and well-being. Research from the International Fresh Produce Association highlights that while toddlers often meet recommended fruit and vegetable intake, this trend declines as children age. This highlights the continued need for consistent efforts to promote produce consumption at all ages during all meals and snacks. This is where everyone plays a role in feeding children during their developmental years.**

Whether you're prepping breakfast or packing lunches at home, a retail dietitian planning store promotions, a school nutrition professional crafting menus for thousands of children, a campus dietitian ensuring balanced dining hall options or a parent fueling your family amidst countless afterschool activities — this is our collective opportunity to make fruits and vegetables daily staples that foster healthy eating patterns that extend beyond the classroom and into lifelong habits.

School nutrition leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring that every child has access to balanced meals that meet nutritional guidelines, support cognitive development and maintain energy levels throughout the school day. The countless K-12 foodservice operations across the country are often the "largest restaurant in town" and these leaders should be celebrated for the creative and delicious work they are doing to feed our future.

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**School meals are carefully crafted to provide the necessary nutrients children need to thrive academically and physically. Schools are making it easier than ever for students to incorporate fruits and vegetables into their daily routine, every time they eat — during school breakfast, at lunch in the cafeteria, in the school greenhouse or garden, and in afterschool snacks to take on-the-go. These repeated exposures to produce at school encourage children to embrace fruits and vegetables at home, beyond school hours.**

While back-to-school nutrition is crucial for younger students, it's equally important for college students navigating new independence. These young adults face unique challenges in maintaining healthy eating habits, making continued nutritional education vital during these formative years. As a former campus dietitian, I've seen how busy schedules and social pressures make it even harder for college students to choose healthy options. There's a real opportunity to continue nutrition education at universities through experiential learning, like cooking classes or sampling seasonal produce in dining halls.

To further extend these school nutrition efforts to home, IFPA's Foundation for Fresh Produce has partnered with nine major retailers across the country on a 'Hacks for Healthy Back-to-School Habits' campaign. This campaign simplifies healthy eating for families by offering simple, practical "hacks" that include easy meal prep ideas, quick snack solutions and creative ways to make produce more appealing and easier for children to consume. See what a retailer near you may be up to!

**With September being National Fruits & Veggies Month (NFVM), it's a natural extension of these back-to-school initiatives to celebrate all month long. The new school year can mark an opportunity for a fresh start, creating new habits or even trying something new. Now is the time to unite and encourage everyone — from children to adults — to prioritize produce in every meal and snack. It can't be simpler than this year's NFVM theme: Every Time You Eat, Have A Plant. Whether at home, at school, at work, dining out or on-the-go, eating more fruits and vegetables can be easy and fun.**

To help us unify messaging and get everyone celebrating, grab the NFVM Toolkit, filled with turn-key resources for promoting fruits and vegetables at various points of influence, meeting consumers where they are: at the Point Of Inspiration (digital and social media), Point Of Sale (retail), and Point Of Flavor (culinary and foodservice).

Whether you are talking to consumers directly online, creating a retail promotion of your own, or responsible for plant-inspired menu creations at a foodservice establishment, there is something for everyone here.

Follow along @fruitsandveggies, and use the hashtags #NFVM2024 and #haveaplant in all your social media posts to spread awareness about the importance of fruits and veggies for your health and happiness this month!

For more fruit and veggie inspiration and everything you need to support your consumer marketing plans, visit [www.fruitsandveggies.org](http://www.fruitsandveggies.org).

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