Why school and junk food don’t mix.
And what educators can do about it.

Step 1: Five reasons to avoid junk food in the classroom

1. **Children’s health and well-being are at stake.**
   Children are inundated with low-quality food and drinks, items filled with sugar and additives that have been shown to have startling effects on their health, development, behavior and ability to learn. We’ve all heard the stats about childhood obesity, but these issues don’t discriminate. Skinny kids can be unhealthy, too.

2. **Parents (and only parents) should decide what their children eat.**
   Parents are free to feed their children however they choose. But that right does not extend to other people’s children. Whether families avoid certain ingredients because of allergies, dietary needs or lifestyle choices, parents need to know their rights won’t be usurped by other parents or teachers offering food in class.

3. **Children see schools and teachers as role models.**
   Parents can (and do) tell kids no, that they can’t take the lollipop at the bank or the blue birthday cupcake. But when treats are so common that they’re no longer “special,” when ingredients are inferior and even dangerous, when “choice” is a toss-up between “bad” and “worse,” then parents need allies. Especially at school, where kids spend most of their weekday hours and where junk food is epidemic: birthday celebrations, holiday parties, rewards, sports practices, fundraisers, fairs, vending machines and even classroom activities. Children take very seriously the lessons and values they learn in school. Allowing junk food in the classroom is an endorsement of junk food.

4. **Unlike school lunch, classroom food can change overnight.**
   School lunch gets a lot of attention. And better school lunch is worth fighting for. But that takes time. It requires buy-in from many different parties. And the results may not be apparent for years. Changing food at the classroom level takes only a couple of committed people. And it can happen quickly, even overnight.

5. **Classrooms will be happier places, for both kids and teachers.**
   This isn’t just about children. It’s also about educators. Every teacher has seen what can happen: Kids act out because of artificial food colors and preservatives. Or they’re sluggish and inattentive because of sugar. Some children are particularly sensitive and show more obvious signs, but almost all kids respond to these substances in some way. (Adults, too.) And, as educators well know, one disruptive child can drain a teacher’s energy and throw off the balance of the entire class.
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Step 2: Five ways educators can help

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1. **Get up to speed on the issues.**
   Visit [www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/](http://www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/) for resources on food, food additives, health and behavior.

2. **Just say no to any food in the classroom.**
   Make a commitment to not allow food in the classroom. Instead of birthday treats, ask the birthday child to share a special book or toy with the class. Instead of food rewards, use privileges or experiences as prizes. Instead of junk-food fundraisers, sell items that support healthy bodies and healthy communities. Visit [www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/](http://www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/) for non-food ideas for classroom celebrations and rewards, and ideas for healthy fundraisers.

3. **If you do allow food, encourage real-food alternatives.**
   If you choose to still allow birthday treats, suggest alternatives with no chemical additives and little sugar. Do the same for class holiday parties, or ask parents to sign up for specific items that you (or a like-minded class parent) identify. Ask that parents send water only, not juice or sports drinks or soda. Also ask parents to consider that what children eat affects their behavior, and thus affects the entire class and the teacher’s ability to manage the class. Visit [www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/](http://www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/) for alternative snack and treat ideas.

4. **Tell parents about food in advance.**
   If there will be food for a birthday or classroom activity, tell parents *in advance*. This allows time for parents to talk to their child, then opt out or provide an alternative, if desired. This can be as simple as an e-mail or a mention in the weekly class newsletter. You might also provide a birthday list at the start of the year.

5. **Help students become food-literate.**
   Children are able to understand food choices and eager to make their own decisions. Help them do that by using age-appropriate curricula, field trips, books and movies to discuss where food comes from, how it affects our bodies and why it all matters. Visit [www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/](http://www.spoonfedblog.net/resources/) for resources developed with exactly that purpose in mind.

Finally… thank you! Together, we can do this.

*Spoonfed: Raising kids to think about the food they eat* 
[www.spoonfedblog.net](http://www.spoonfedblog.net)