



# TUCKAHOE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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January 2018

Dear Tuckahoe Community,

There has been recent interest in examining school practices related to how food is incorporated at school, from lunch, to daily snacks, to birthday celebrations, to class parties. APS has a School Health Advisory Board (SHAB), a collaboration between APS, School Health, and interested parents. SHAB created a set of comprehensive guidelines based on best practices from around the country that has looked at this issue on a larger scale, in addition to all of the other school-related health and wellness issues they explore. APS has adopted the SHAB guidelines. However, it should be noted that the guidelines are not a policy document; rather suggested practices that schools are also encouraged to adopt. This has resulted in a variety of steps among schools, guided primarily by each school's community and culture.

The guidelines, as adopted by APS, read as follows:

- Schools are strongly encouraged to develop policies that prohibit food for in-class birthday celebrations, in order to minimize inadvertent exposure to food allergens and promote healthy celebrations.
- The District will provide a list of healthy party ideas to parents and teachers, including non-food celebration ideas.
- Schools will require the inclusion of healthful food choices for events and celebrations where food is served.
- Teachers and staff will not use candy, soft drinks, or food as a reward.

We know that more and more students are coming to school with food allergies. Nationwide data, averaged over the last three years, reflect that 6.9% of elementary school students are reported to have food allergies. Tuckahoe's percentage is just below this, but comparable. In addition to food allergies, we do have students with other chronic conditions that can be affected by food at school that does not come from their own homes.

Many families recently participated in a survey created by a subgroup of PTA parents interested in gauging the knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs about how food has been incorporated into school life. I preface by saying that I firmly believe there is no parent who wants to put a child in danger or at risk. To some degree, though, this has been a polarizing issue in our community, as survey comments ranged widely along a continuum. As I read the survey results, comments alternated with statements such as, "birthday celebrations should not include food," "allow food for birthday celebrations," "any rules should apply to the whole school," "only have restrictions on classes where there are food allergies," "no food ever," and "no parties without food." Those who accepted not having sweets brought for birthday celebrations were also very vocal about not having treats substituted with "erasers" or other "small toys"

for students to bring home. You can see that any decisions made will be appreciated by some and not by others.

As Tuckahoe looks to incorporate the APS adopted Guidelines for Celebrations and Rewards, we certainly want to be cognizant of students' health and safety, while not completely eliminating many of Tuckahoe's time-honored traditions. As such, we will begin adhering to the following as updated school policies:

- We are going to begin celebrating birthdays without food. Staff is working on compiling suggested ideas for alternate ways to honor students' birthdays that celebrate these milestones while not significantly impacting instructional time.
- Classrooms with students with peanut allergies will continue to be nut-free, and teachers will inform parents, particularly with regard to snacks.
- "Big event" classroom parties (Halloween, Winter, End-of-Year, etc.) may take place. However, it is to be the teachers who determine what food will be included and parents informed so that they can plan accordingly.
- Healthy choices (fruit, veggies) will be offered as an option at all parties and sugary treats limited.
- In the cafeteria, students at the nut-free table may invite a friend, only so they don't eat alone. When multiple students at a grade level sit at this table, it is not necessary nor feasible to accommodate each student also inviting a friend.
- When lunch must be in the classrooms, teams will have determined how to separate those who have nut items from those who must be nut-free, and desks will be wiped down following lunch.
- Greater emphasis will be given to washing hands before and after lunch.
- Food will not be used as a reward for classroom behaviors.

It is a new step for us to have such statements listed formally. As with any change, there will be a period of adjustment, and there undoubtedly will be students who are upset about the change in birthday celebrations. It is my hope that students will recognize this is not being initiated as a restriction for them, but as an opportunity for classmates to celebrate with them in a way that is safe for all. This also can be connected back to our Kindness is Contagious program, which takes into consideration the needs of others and things we can do to support one another.

I appreciate the community's input into this discussion and recognize that there are elements moving forward with which all may not agree. Part of our strength and success as a school community is open dialogue and working together to do the best we can to meet everyone's needs. I believe that moving to the procedures bulleted above will help alleviate some of the concerns about food provided to students that they did not bring from home, as well as maintain many of the events that make Tuckahoe the school that it is.

Sincerely,



Mitch Pascal  
Principal