INGREDIENT GUIDE 2026

for Better School Food Purchasing

QUICK REFERENCE

Last updated November 2026

INGREDIENT GUIDE INTRODUCTION

This guide is a resource for school food leaders and manufacturers alike who are committed to improving the overall quality, nutritional value and safety of food provided to all students in every school. It highlights unwanted ingredients to eliminate, and those to watch out for as new food products are developed and others are modified.

This document is a science-based tool created primarily by school nutrition professionals, for school nutrition professionals, in partnership with Center for Science in the Public Interest.

The full version with descriptions and citations can be downloaded here:

THIS GUIDE IS ENDORSED BY:

Chef Ann Foundation

Center for Good Food Purchasing

Center for Science in the Public Interest

Eat Real

FoodCorps

Healthy Schools Campaign

Life Time Foundation

LunchAssist

National Farm to School Network

ScratchWorks

Urban School Food Alliance

Wellness in the Schools

Whole Foods Market Foundation

UNWANTED LIST

Ingredients that are not acceptable at any level in newly developed products, and should be eliminated over time from existing products.

1 ARTIFICIAL COLORS

- Synthetic Food Dyes (Blue 1, Blue 2, Green 3, Red 3, Red 40, Yellow 5, Yellow 6)
- Caramel Color CL 3-4
- Titanium Dioxide

2 ARTIFICIAL & UNSPECIFIED NATURAL FLAVORS

3 ARTIFICIAL PRESERVATIVES

- Butylated Hydroxyanisole (BHA)
- Butylated Hydroxytoluene (BHT)
- Propyl Gallate
- Tert-Butylhydroquinone (TBHQ)

4 ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS & OTHER SUGAR-FREE (Non-Nutritive, Low-Calorie and Reduced-Calorie) SWEETENERS

5 EMULSIFIERS

- Brominated Vegetable Oil (BVO)
- Carboxymethylcellulose (CMC) and Polysorbates

6 FLOUR TREATMENT AGENTS

- Bromated Flour/Potassium Bromate
- Azodicarbonamide (ADA)
- Potassium Iodate

7 NITRITES/NITRATES & PROCESSED MEAT

8 PROPYLPARABEN

WATCH LIST



Ingredients common in foods of lower nutritional quality, and/or tend to indicate a highly processed food. Watch, limit, demand transparency and accountability in their use.

1. ADDED SODIUM
2. ADDED SUGARS (INCLUDING SUGARY SYRUPS)
3. CAFFEINE (Especially Added Caffeine)
4. NATURAL FLAVORS (Specified)
5. PHOSPHORIC ACID & PHOSPHATES
6. REFINED OR WHITE (including Bleached) FLOUR
7. SUGARS METABOLIZED DIFFERENTLY FROM TRADITIONAL SUGARS:

   Allulose

   Tagatose
8. THICKENING AGENTS

   Carrageenan

ALLERGENS & SENSITIVITIES



In addition to the top nine most common food allergies schools are already familiar with (peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, dairy, egg, fish, shellfish, sesame), this new Allergens & Sensitivities category is for school districts to be aware of these potentially problematic ingredients and better equipped to minimize reactions and maximize safety for the majority of our students.

1 COLORINGS (Naturally Derived)

Annatto

Cochineal Extract/Carmine

2 HYDROLYZED VEGETABLE PROTEIN (HVP)

3 MONOSODIUM GLUTAMATE (MSG)

4 MYCOPROTEIN

5 ARTIFICIAL PRESERVATIVES

Benzoates and Benzoic Acid

Sulfites