



BY ALEXANDRIA CITY HIGH SCHOOL

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TOPIC

12th grade team- Inclusive School Meal Options at Alexandria City High School

TOPIC DESCRIPTION

At Alexandria City High School, the cafeteria does not currently offer inclusive meals that meet the needs of all students. There are no certified halal options, no dedicated gluten-free meals, and no clearly labeled allergy-friendly foods. Students with dietary restrictions, due to religion (such as Islam), allergies, or health conditions, are often unable to eat lunch, which can affect their physical health, academic performance, and emotional well-being. Our civic action project aims to change school nutrition policy so that every student has access to safe, inclusive, and culturally respectful food. This issue primarily affects students from Muslim communities, students with food allergies, and those with celiac disease or other food-related medical needs, but ultimately impacts the entire school community by creating inequality in one of the most basic student services: food.

RESULT



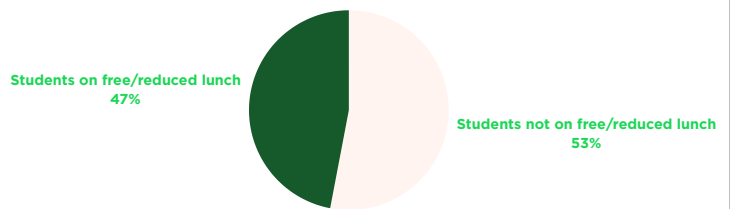
100%

Students at ACHS

Our intended result is that 100% of students at ACHS will have access to safe, healthy, and inclusive meals that meet their dietary needs. This includes the introduction of certified halal meals, gluten-free options, and allergy-friendly alternatives as permanent, standard items on the school menu. These changes will ensure all students, regardless of religion, medical needs, or personal health, can safely eat lunch every day at school without needing a medical form or special request.

SIGNIFICANCE

School meals are essential to student well-being. For many students at Alexandria City High School, lunch is their primary or only meal of the day. Without inclusive options, students with religious or medical dietary restrictions are left hungry, distracted, and unsupported. This directly affects focus, energy, participation, and academic performance. It also creates long-term inequality, when some students feel included and cared for, and others feel ignored or left out based on their identity or health. Achieving the goal of 100% meal inclusive supports educational equity, health, and Alexandria's CYCP goals. For example, according to ACPS, 47% of ACHS students rely on free or reduced lunch. If even a small portion of those students cannot eat the meals served, that's hundreds of youth going through the school day hungry. Creating inclusive meals improves academic outcomes, emotional wellness, and community trust.



CYCP GOAL AND STRATEGIC AREA

Goal 2 - All children and youth in Alexandria are academically successful and career ready.

Strategic Area: Coordinated and Equitable Systems.

This project aligns with the strategic goal of building equitable school systems that support student health, well-being, and readiness to learn. When school meals are not inclusive, students can't fully participate in school, so creating accessible meals supports both academic success and equity.

HOW ARE WE DOING?

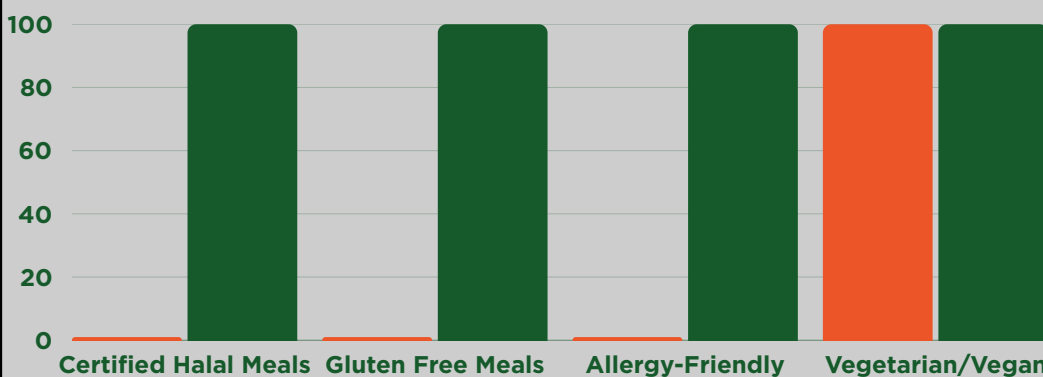
Current Status:

Right now, Alexandria City High School offers vegetarian and vegan options, and no pork is served. However, there are no certified halal meals, no labeled gluten-free meals, and no standardized allergy-friendly menu available to students.

Data:

- 0% of current ACHS meals are certified halal or gluten-free
- 100% of students with dietary needs must request accommodations individually and submit a form signed by a doctor (ACPS Dietary Accommodations Form)
- 47% of ACHS students rely on free or reduced-price lunch, meaning they may depend on school meals as their primary daily nutrition (Source: ACPS Fast Facts)
- In national studies, 44% of parents say they're unsatisfied with school meal health or inclusivity (Source: NIH/PMC Study.)

ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE SCHOOL MEALS AT ACHS



EXPLANATION OF CHART:

The green represents the percentage amount of different types of food that is needed, which is 100% for every food option. The orange represents the percentage availability of each food option, which is 0% for every single food option beside the vegetarian/vegan option. Our goal is to close this massive gap between what our students need and what is currently available.

IMPLEMENTATION

To address the lack of inclusive school meals at Alexandria City High School, we developed a civic action plan focused on research, data collection, advocacy, and proposed policy changes. We began by researching ACPS’s current meal accommodations and discovered that students must submit a signed medical form to access allergy-safe meals, and there are no certified halal or gluten-free options currently offered. We created a baseline using data from ACPS, NIH, and other national sources. We also brainstormed implementation steps, including a student survey, that will gather real-time feedback about meal accessibility and satisfaction.

Our strategy is to:

- Advocate for certified halal and gluten-free meals as standard daily options
- Recommend clear labeling of all allergy-safe and vegetarian meals
- Push for a simplified meal request form that does not require a doctor’s note for religious accommodations
- Propose staff training for food safety and religious sensitivity
- Share our findings with school board members and ACPS Nutrition Services

We will present this issue as both a health equity and academic performance matter. If meals are inaccessible, students can’t learn at their full potential. Our plan is realistic, actionable, and based on clear CYCP goals.

PARTNERSHIPS



1. ACPS Office of School Nutrition Services

Role: They oversee meal planning and policy. We are recommending changes directly to them.



2. Alexandria School Board
- Role: Has the power to approve changes to school meal policy and implement new vendor partnerships.

3. Local Religious Organizations (e.g., Islamic Center of Northern Virginia)

Role: Can help advise on halal-certified vendors and educate staff on cultural needs.



4. Alexandria Health Department

Role: Supports student health and can provide guidelines for allergy-safe, medically approved meals.



5. ACHS PTA and Student Organizations



Role: Help build student voice and support inside the school.

PERFORMANCE EFFORT

While full policy change has not yet occurred, our project has already led to increased awareness of the lack of inclusive school meals at ACHS. Our data collection and presentation of facts, such as 0% availability of halal, gluten-free, and allergy-labeled meals, have sparked conversations among students, staff, and potential community partners. We are on track to present our recommendations to school officials, and we’ve identified realistic actions ACPS can take (e.g., certified meal vendors, revised request forms). Although meals haven’t changed yet, our effort has brought student voice into the spotlight, and we’ve laid the groundwork for lasting impact.

PERFORMANCE EFFECT

Consequences: Students who can’t eat school lunch due to religious or health needs may go hungry, leading to fatigue, loss of focus, or lower academic performance. It can also cause students to feel excluded or unsupported at school.

Barriers:

- Lack of certified halal/gluten-free vendors currently contracted by ACPS
- School meals require a signed doctor’s form for accommodations, creating access barriers
- Budget and logistical constraints for new menu planning

Positive Factors:

- Vegetarian and pork-free options already exist, which shows ACPS has made progress toward cultural inclusivity
- ACPS’s “Equity for All 2025” plan emphasizes student health and equal access to school services
- Community support is available from religious, medical, and parent groups who want these changes

Negative Factors:

- Limited awareness at the district level
- Low visibility of current accommodations (students don’t know they exist or how to request them)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our main recommendation is that Alexandria City High School and ACPS revise their current school nutrition policy to include permanent, daily meal options that are inclusive of all dietary needs.

This means:

1. Add Certified Halal and Gluten-Free Options

ACPS should partner with halal-certified and gluten-free vendors to provide meals that meet religious and medical dietary laws. These meals should be clearly labeled, available every day, and not require special requests or forms.

2. Allergy-Friendly Meals and Clear Labeling

Every meal item should include allergy information, such as common allergens (nuts, dairy, gluten), to allow students with medical conditions to safely eat. ACPS should adopt a labeling system that mirrors what’s used in restaurants or hospitals.

3. Simplify the Meal Accommodation Process

The current process requires families to submit a doctor-signed form for any accommodations. This creates barriers, especially for religious or financial reasons. We recommend creating a streamlined online form where students or parents can self-identify dietary needs without needing a doctor’s signature for religious restrictions.

4. Mandatory Staff Training on Dietary Inclusivity

Cafeteria staff should be trained annually on food allergies, religious dietary laws, cross-contamination, and labeling systems. This supports student safety and ensures respectful, inclusive food handling.

5. Student Menu Advisory Group

Form a student group that works with Nutrition Services to test new meals, gather feedback, and help create more inclusive menus. This gives students direct voice and ownership in solving the problem.

These recommendations align directly with Goal 2 of the CYCP (academic success and equity) and the Strategic Area of Coordinated & Equitable Systems. They’re also realistic, other districts like Fairfax County already offer halal and gluten-free meals regularly. Alexandria should do the same to support all students.

ONLINE

1. ACPS Office of School Nutrition Services:

This is the main source of current school meal policy, forms, and menu options. It helps us understand what’s offered and what’s missing.
<https://www.acps.k12.va.us/departments/facilities-operations/the-office-of-school-nutrition-services>

2. CDC Food Allergy Guidelines for Schools

This resource explains how schools should handle allergies safely and inclusively. It helped us shape our recommendations for labeling and staff training.
<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/foodallergies/>

IN PERSON

1. Alexandria Health Department

Located in the city, this agency provides public health guidance on student nutrition and dietary accommodations. They can help schools plan allergy-safe and medically appropriate meals.

2. Islamic Center of Northern Virginia (or other local mosque)

Religious leaders and community members can guide schools on proper halal food preparation and help recommend certified vendors. They are essential partners in cultural inclusion efforts.

CITATIONS

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