AGES 11–14 | 30 MIN | MATH | SOCIAL STUDIES | HUMAN ECOLOGY

What's really *on your plate?*

Every dinner is a decision about money, time, and tradition. Students compare three ways one family could eat tonight, then trace where the food comes from and what gets thrown away.

GRADES	TIME	GROUPING	TOOLS
6–8	One 30-minute period	Pairs + whole class	Calculators helpful



WHY THIS LESSON

A meal is a set of decisions.

What a family eats depends on more than taste. Time, money, access, and culture each have a say.

A weeknight dinner connects a household budget to farms and warehouses hundreds of miles away, to the time adults have after work, and to recipes passed down through a family. Students start with a choice they already know, what's for dinner, and follow it outward: what it costs, where the ingredients come from, what is left over, and who in the household does the work.

There is no single right dinner. Students see the trade-offs a household weighs every night.

THE CLOSING QUESTION

"How might the best choice differ for another household?"

BY THE END OF CLASS, STUDENTS CAN…

01 / CALCULATE

Compare the cost.

Work out each dinner's total, its cost per serving, and how it fits a $20 budget.

02 / INVESTIGATE

Read the label.

Find where two ingredients come from, and name what the labels and the menu leave out.

03 / CONNECT

See the whole meal.

Explain how time, money, access, and culture shape what one household eats.

04 / REFLECT

Weigh a change.

Suggest one way to reduce waste and name the trade-off it creates.

Built from the "What's really on your plate?" sample lesson. The household, prices, and labels are fictional.

BEFORE CLASS

Materials and prep

About 10 minutes of prep. Everything students need is in the student pack.

ITEM	NOTES	READY
Household card	One per pair. Top of the student handout.	☐
Three dinner cards	One set per pair. Cut apart along the dashed lines, or show on screen.	☐
Student worksheet	One per student. Two pages, printed back to back.	☐
Calculators	Phones are fine.	☐
Board space	For the warm-up answers and the four-forces chart.	☐
Answer key	Page 4 of this guide. Keep it with you.	☐

VOCABULARY TO PREVIEW budget · ingredient · cost per serving · packaging · leftovers · food waste

A note on privacy. Food and money can be sensitive topics. Students talk about the fictional household, not their own. No one needs to share what they eat or spend at home.

THE CASE

Meet the Ellis family.

Ava, 12, her dad, her grandmother, and her brother Leo, 8. It's Tuesday. Dad works until 6:00 and gets home at 6:30. Grandma volunteers at the library until 5:00. She likes to cook the chicken soup her mother taught her to make. Leo has soccer practice until 6:00 and comes home hungry. The family wants dinner on the table by 7:00.

They shop once a week, on Saturdays, at a grocery store 3 miles away. The corner store on their block sells milk, bread, and snacks, but no fresh meat.

FOOD BUDGET	AMOUNT
Food for the whole week	$160
Planned for other meals	−$140
Set aside for tonight	**$20**

Salt, pepper, spices, and oil are already in the kitchen and not counted.

THE THREE DINNERS AT A GLANCE

	A · GRANDMA'S CHICKEN SOUP	B · STIR-FRY MEAL KIT	C · PIZZA DELIVERY
Price	$13.50 for 8 servings	$24.00 for 4 servings	$27.00 ($22 + $5 delivery), 16 slices
Where it's from	Chicken in-state, rice Arkansas, carrots California, onion Washington, celery Mexico, garlic no label	Chicken USA, broccoli Mexico, rice Thailand, sauce packed in Ohio; kit put together 300 miles away	The menu lists toppings, not where they come from
Time	15 min prep + 60 min simmer	25 min to cook	About 40 min to arrive
Who cooks	Grandma, with help chopping	Ava and Dad	No one
Left over	4 lunch servings, bones, peels, foam tray, plastic wrap	Box, 7 plastic bags, ice pack, sauce cup	4 slices, 2 greasy boxes, napkins, 2 sauce cups

LESSON SEQUENCE · 30 MINUTES

Choose. Investigate. Connect. Reflect.

Students work in pairs on the worksheet and come together as a class for the warm-up and the four-forces chart.

3 MIN

WARM-UP What decides dinner?

TEACHER

Write the question on the board. Collect five or six answers and sort them into four columns: Time, Money, Access, and Culture. Keep the chart up for later.

STUDENTS

Call out answers about any household: one they know, one from a show, or one they imagine.

What decides what a family has for dinner on a busy weeknight?

4 MIN

CHOOSE Meet the Ellis family.

TEACHER

Hand out the household card and the three dinner cards. Point out the $20 for tonight and dinner by 7:00.

STUDENTS

Read the cards in pairs. At the top of the worksheet, circle the dinner you would pick and list its ingredients.

10 MIN

INVESTIGATE Add it up and read the labels.

TEACHER

Circulate. Check that pairs divide by servings, not by people, for the soup. Ask early finishers what each dinner would cost if the family ate it every Tuesday for four weeks.

STUDENTS

Complete Part 1: cost, budget, cost per serving, and time. Then Part 2: where two ingredients come from and what the labels don't say.

Which dinner costs the least? Which takes the most time, and whose time is it?

8 MIN

CONNECT Time, money, access, culture.

TEACHER

Return to the warm-up chart. For each column, ask which dinner it favors. Then change one fact at a time: "Grandma has to stay at the library until 6:30." "The family missed Saturday's shopping." Ask what changes.

STUDENTS

Complete Part 3: one sentence on how each force shapes the Ellis family's choice.

TIME	MONEY	ACCESS	CULTURE
Who has it, and when?	$20 tonight, $160 a week	What the stores nearby sell	A recipe passed down

5 MIN

REFLECT Less waste, a new trade-off.

TEACHER

Collect exit tickets. Read three trade-offs aloud to open the next class.

STUDENTS

Complete Part 4 on the worksheet.

Suggest one change that would reduce waste from your dinner. What trade-off might it create? How might the best choice differ for another household?

INVESTIGATE · TEACHER VIEW

Answer key

WORKSHEET PART 1	A · SOUP	B · KIT	C · PIZZA
Total cost tonight	$13.50	$24.00	$27.00
Compared with $20	$6.50 left	$4.00 over	$7.00 over
Servings	8	4	4
Cost per serving	**$1.69**	**$6.00**	**$6.75**
Minutes until dinner	75	25	40
Who does the work	Grandma, with help	Ava and Dad	No one cooks
Early finishers: every Tuesday for four weeks	$54	$96	$108

DISCUSSION POINTS

The soup costs the least in total and per serving, and it leaves four lunches. It also takes the most time, and it only works because Grandma is home by 5:00. The meal kit is quick to cook but goes $4 over budget and leaves the most packaging. The pizza needs no cooking, costs the most, and its menu says nothing about where the food comes from.

Missing information worth naming: whether everyone in the family likes soup, how the meal kit travels to the door, whether the pizza boxes can be recycled where the family lives, and what else the $160 has to cover this week.

ASSESSMENT

What to look for

Grade the reasoning. A student who picks the soup and a student who picks the pizza can both earn full marks. No dinner is the one right answer.

CRITERION	BEGINNING	DEVELOPING	STRONG
Calculates accurately	Compares the total prices only	Finds cost per serving with minor errors	Correct totals, budget difference, and cost per serving for all three dinners
Traces where food comes from	Copies a place from a label	Names where two ingredients come from	Names two origins and one thing the label leaves out
Considers more than cost	Chooses on price alone	Mentions time or tradition	Weighs money against time, access, and culture for this family
Proposes a change	Names a change	Names a change and one effect	Names a change and the trade-off it creates for someone in the household

MAKE IT FIT YOUR CLASS

SUPPORT

Fewer numbers

Pre-fill the soup column so pairs see the pattern. Skip cost per serving and compare each total with the $20.

EXTEND

Price it locally

Pairs look up the soup ingredients at a store near school and compare their total with $13.50. Or they design a fourth dinner that stays under $20.

BRING IT HOME

A family recipe

Students ask an adult: "Is there a dish someone taught you to make? Who taught you?" They share the name of the dish next class, not what the family eats or spends.

Older students (ages 15–18): give pairs the full $160 weekly budget and have them plan seven dinners for the Ellis family.