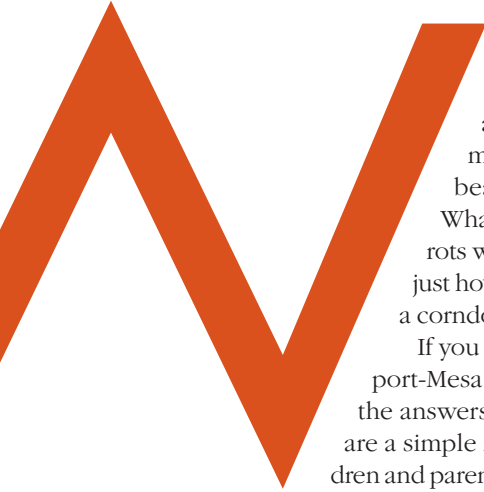


Trading french fries for salad bars,
districts nationwide are taking a healthy
new look at what they serve for lunch

BY KATHLEEN VAIL



SCHOOL FOOD REVOLUTION



Want to know exactly how many calories are in that bean and cheese burrito? What about those baby carrots with ranch dressing? And just how much cholesterol is in a corn dog, anyway?

If you live in California's Newport-Mesa Unified School District, the answers to questions like these are a simple mouse click away. Children and parents who visit the district's website can find out the sodium, cholesterol,

fiber, and fat content in every lunch menu choice

Newport-Mesa, like many districts across the nation, has entered the brave new world of school food. It's an area that always has been governed by regulations and ruled by the constraints of the marketplace. But today, health concerns over alarmingly high numbers of overweight and obese students are spurring numerous changes in how and what schools feed children.

"It's not about being a food cop; it's about our state's essential survival," says Susan Combs, the agriculture secretary in Texas, which now requires schools to reduce portion sizes and stop all deep-fat frying. "It is what's right for these kids."

Districts are transforming everything about the food they offer. Today's schools are providing nutrition information, salad bars heaped with fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms, vegetarian and vegan alternatives. Frying is out; baking is in. Even that greasy fast-food favorite—the pizza—is getting a health-conscious makeover, complete with whole-wheat crust, low-fat cheese, and veggie toppings.

Not on the nutrition bandwagon yet? No doubt you will be soon. The recent reauthorization of the federal National School Lunch Program requires districts to create wellness policies for nutrition and fitness. States such as California and Texas are insisting that schools regulate, and in some cases eliminate, sales of soda and sugary, fatty snacks during the school day.

"There are a lot of barriers to change," says Amy Lanou, nutrition director for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a Washington, D.C., group that follows school lunch issues. "It's amazing to me what some districts are doing in light of all these barriers and obstacles."

What's so important about school food?

By now, we've all heard the numbers. An estimated 15 percent of children 6 to 19 are overweight—almost 9 million children and teenagers, according to a 1999-2000 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's nearly triple the number of children who were overweight in 1980, and another

15 percent in that age group are at risk of becoming overweight.

Obesity is a complex issue that is influenced by many factors, including genetics and activity level. Why should schools, where children spend only about six hours a day, take responsibility for yet another nonacademic problem?

One obvious reason is that while not all factors can be controlled, school food can be. "Schools are a target because they are an institution that can be looked at and focused on for policy change," says Michele Simon of the Center for Informed Food Choices, an Oakland, Calif., group that advocates eating more whole, unprocessed foods.

The National School Lunch Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is highly regulated. Meals must meet certain nutritional standards, and none may contain more than 30 percent of calories from fat and 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.

But some nutritionists and food advocates say these guidelines should be even more stringent. Cheese and other processed and canned foods are among the most common commodities available free to schools, and that doesn't leave much room for fresh fruits and vegetables. À la carte lines, which serve food that children can purchase in addition to the subsidized school lunch, have little or no regulation.

Schools—large and small, rural, urban, and suburban—are taking more responsibility for all of the food students eat in their buildings every day. Contractors such as ARAMARK Education and Sohexo School Services also are getting into the act (see page 15).

In California's Berkeley Unified School District, students now drink milk produced with no growth hormones. At lunch they dine on baked organic chicken nuggets, noodles with garlic, and rice bowls topped with vegetables, and they receive a free bottle of water with every meal. In Fairfax County, Va., children can choose calcium-fortified fruit juices or soymilk in place of regular cow's milk. The Los Angeles Leadership Academy, a charter school, has banished hydrogenated oils, sugar, and refined flour from its breakfast and lunch offerings.

Most school food programs must be self-sustaining, and often decisions are based on business rather than nutrition. But those on the forefront of the healthier school food movement say they have seen a jump—not a decline—in lunch participation, thanks to liberal doses of nutrition education and marketing.

"Most directors are scared to death. They feel they have to have the potato chips and fatty foods to appeal to the kids," says Richard Greene, nutrition director for Newport-Mesa schools. "We are finding that it's not true."

The whole food environment

Traditionally, food service has been outside the realm of the school, not part of it. Food service directors are working to change that perception, to have lunch become part of the school day and to provide nutrition education in the classroom.

"Really it's nutrition education when you are serving a meal," says Ev Beliveau, director of nutrition and education at



Newport-Mesa Unified School District students grow and harvest vegetables, like this corn, in their school gardens.

the School Nutrition Association, the Alexandria, Va., trade organization that represents school food service employees. “You’re showing them age-appropriate portion sizes and introducing new foods.”

School food service directors say a districtwide policy on nutrition is an important first step to change perceptions and what is being served. Beliveau says her organization was instrumental in adding the wellness policy requirement to the new school lunch law. The policy, which all schools must have in place by July 2006, should include goals for nutrition education and physical activity as well as nutrition guidelines for all foods available on each school campus.

The aim of this requirement, says Kate Coler, USDA deputy undersecretary for food, nutrition, and consumer services, is to put student nutrition and health on the radar for all school leaders and their communities. “It starts the dialogue,” she says. “It leads to some action.”

Dorothy Brayley, executive director of Kids First, a Providence, R.I., organization that advocates for improved child nutrition, says school food service directors are very interested in making nutritional changes. They cite factors beyond the school’s control—competitive foods sold outside the breakfast

and lunch programs—as a major obstruction. A comprehensive nutrition policy makes everyone aware of all the food sold in the school, not just what’s on the lunch line.

For some schools that already have nutrition policies, vending machines and food outside the school breakfast and lunch program were first in line for change. Berkeley Unified developed a food and nutrition policy in 1999 that dealt with the nutritional value of vending machine offerings. The policy also discouraged fundraising based on candy sales and using candy as an incentive in the classroom.

“Having the annual ice cream social is fine, but selling ice cream every day after school is not,” says Karen Candito, Berkeley Unified’s nutrition services director. Candito says this nutrition sensibility extends to the adults as well. Teachers, administrators, and parents are asked not to have unhealthy foods such as doughnuts at their meetings and other events.

“We’re asking adults to model good behavior,” she says.

Cutting carrots, slicing apples

Food-related diseases are the second leading cause of preventable death in the United States, and they’re poised to overtake the leading cause, smoking. A diet rich in fruits and

vegetables can stave off heart disease and certain types of cancer, so it's obviously advantageous to put them on the school menu. However, getting fresh produce into the cafeteria poses many challenges—not the least of which is persuading children to eat it.

Berkeley—the birthplace of the well-known Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard program in 1994—has been a pioneer in the school food revolution. In addition to the Edible Schoolyard's garden-to-table approach at one middle school, the district promotes the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables in other schools as well. Candito did not have a hard time starting a healthy school food program: The district has many school gardens and, because it's in coastal California, has access to fresh produce all year long. What was hard, she says, was getting the idea into the infrastructure. Many schools were offering their own salad bars but would stop when grant money dried up or staff members left. Now, she says, elementary school children have salad bars and a vegetarian option. Middle school students can choose from a 28-item produce bar that includes bell peppers, zucchini, mushrooms, fruit, lettuce, pickles, and olives.

Labor costs associated with cutting, processing, and handling fresh fruits and vegetables are higher, Candito acknowledges, and the logistics of ordering and distribution are complex as well. However, Candito has made the program work by improving the efficiency of the district's food operations, and she says schools are seeing an increase in lunch participation.

Paul Flock, the child nutrition supervisor for the Olympia (Wash.) School District, saw what Candito was doing in Berkeley and wanted to try something similar. Flock worked with the state's agriculture department to get in touch with small, organic farmers in his area and started an organic salad bar at one elementary school. All 11 elementary schools now have salad bars, and Flock has managed to control costs by eliminating desserts.

"If they want something sweet, they go to the salad bar and get an apple," Flock says. "Some kids were disappointed, but they got over it quickly."

Flock says students have embraced the program and now are eating 30 percent more of the healthful foods than when the program started in 2002. "If it's attractively displayed, they will take it," he says.

A national nonprofit group, Farm to School, links districts with local farmers in an effort to get more fresh fruits and vegetables. Based in Los Angeles, the organization helps districts deal with issues that surround serving fresh fruits and vegetables to students, such as delivery, labor, distribution, and price, among others.

In the beginning, the organization's Anupama Joshi says, it was parents who were instrumental in starting these programs. Today, it's food service directors calling to find out how they can start one.

The USDA is helping encourage kids to eat their veggies, too, as part of a pilot program now being conducted in eight states. Fruits and vegetables are provided as free snacks during the school day at participating districts. "They actually are eating it and enjoying it," Coler says.

The eyes have it

Schools are also becoming sensitive to the idea that food should be a feast for the eyes and palate, not just wholesome

Food-related diseases are the second leading cause of preventable death in the United States.

and filling. Chefs with professional training and restaurant experience are working with school food service programs all over the country. Most prominently, the New York City schools recently hired Jorge Collazo of the New England Culinary Institute to overhaul its meals.

In Marblehead, Mass., William Idell, who worked as a chef in several areas of the country, is the director of nutrition services at the Marblehead Community Charter School. Idell regularly uses his culinary skills to make flavorful and healthy dishes, including ratatouille, steamed broccoli with roasted garlic, and grilled vegetable kabobs topped with basil puree.

"I'm just trying to introduce new items you wouldn't see in a school setting, like flank steak and fresh salsa," Idell says. "We do more cooking from scratch."

Creativity with food is a great help, especially when dealing with commodity food, he says. "Sometimes you can work magic," he says. "We get a lot of low-fat mozzarella. You can do a million things with it—baked ziti, tomato basil mozzarella salad. That's part of the challenge."

Gloria Boccato, director of food services for the Los Angeles Leadership Academy, says nutritious, made-from-scratch meals are a must for her school's students. She allows no sugar, white flour, or hydrogenated oils in her food and instead uses brown rice, semolina pasta, and olive oil.

"Some people call it militant. We call it healthy," she says. "The first year it was tough, but now the students think it's wonderful."

The sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders who attend the

Leadership Academy come from the neediest families in central Los Angeles. Students get a fresh homemade entree every day, including penne pasta with ground turkey, enchilada casseroles, and turkey and bean chili with corn bread. They also have a full salad bar. The only cans in the kitchen, Boccato says, hold tomato sauce, tuna, and peanut butter.

Boccato, who has a background in catering, says good nutrition is a matter of serious consequence to her students. “We can only function as well as our bodies function,” she says. “If they don’t learn nutrition and take that to the future, they won’t have much of a chance.”

Remaking old favorites

By making lunches healthier, school food service directors are changing the way they cook, altering recipes, and searching for products with less fat and sugar. When Peg Panici, the food service director for Wisconsin’s Appleton Area School District, decided with her staff to do away with fried foods, she confessed the idea was unsettling. “I was terrified,” she says. “I thought my sales would drop.”

Instead, she saw a 20 to 30 percent increase in participation. “Even though [students] can’t have a french fry with their pizza, they are taking other foods, salads and fresh fruits,” she says.

In Appleton, high-fat ice cream has been replaced with low-fat ice cream, and low-fat yogurt is used instead of mayonnaise.

Fruits canned in heavy syrup have been discarded in favor of those canned in light juice. And in California’s Santa Monica/Malibu Unified School District, students are eating low-fat cookies with prune puree as a fat replacement.

Penny McConnell, food service director for the Fairfax County, Va., school system, is working with manufacturers to make products that are lower in fat and hydrogenated oils. McConnell even discovered a manufacturer who makes whole wheat pizza crust that, she says, “looks like a regular pizza crust.” She also found a low-fat cinnamon bun for the breakfast program and has introduced turkey hotdogs and turkey ham.

At a middle school in Newport-Mesa, which is participating in a national obesity study, Richard Greene and his staff have made small but significant adjustments. They serve french fries and nachos with cheese once a week instead of every day. The cafeteria also serves a lower-fat chicken patty. Children can now purchase single-serving baked and low-fat chips with fewer than 200 calories. “A la carte sales are up, and lunch sales are up,” he says.

Greene, a former pastry chef, says his staff is “not the nutrition police.” Instead, he says, “We educate kids to make more healthy choices.”

Getting student buy-in

But just because your cafeterias are offering healthy food doesn’t mean the kids will eat it. Children are notoriously reluctant to try anything new. The trick to getting kids to eat nutritious food is information, education, and, yes, marketing.

Says Brayley of Kids First, “You have to saturate your schools with education on nutrition. The basics of healthy eating—what is that? Everyone is confused. You need basic education.”

Olympia’s Paul Flock introduced his organic salad bars at school assemblies and brought a traveling salad bar into classrooms. Districts like Berkeley Unified and schools like Marblehead Community Charter use school gardens and after-school cooking classes to get students more involved and interested in healthy food preparation. Dona Richwine, nutrition specialist for Santa Monica/Malibu, goes into the classroom with healthy ingredients and makes fruit smoothies and salsa with the students.

Marblehead’s Idell offers new food for free and lets students sample it before he puts it on the lunch menu. When a colleague recently brought in freshly caught sea bass filets, Idell rubbed them with basil and roasted them with garlic and tomatoes. He put them on a platter with a garnish and placed them out during recess for the children to taste.

“Kids have a phobia about trying new things. They want to stay with what is safe,” says Idell. “If you can find a way to try it before they have to pay for it, it increases the chances of them buying it.”

Education might make children try and even like new foods, but what of the siren call of off-campus food joints? That’s where marketing comes in. Berkeley Unified has made its middle and high school healthy food programs look and feel like restaurants, and Candito says she’s seen an increase of 560 per-

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Center for Ecoliteracy’s report,
“Rethinking School Lunch”
www.ecoliteracy.org/index.html

Center for Informed Food Choices
www.informedeating.org

The Edible Schoolyard
www.edibleschoolyard.org

Farm to School
www.farmtoschool.org

Food Research and Action Center
www.frac.org

Kids First
www.kidsfirstri.org

NSBA’s School Health Programs
www.nsba.org/schoolhealth

Physicians Committee for Responsible
Medicine’s Golden Carrot awards programs
www.pcrm.org/news/release041012_winners.html

School Nutrition Association (formerly the American
School Food Service Association)
www.schoolnutrition.org

The USDA’s Team Nutrition
www.fns.usda.gov/tn

cent paid participation in her middle school program.

Middle school students eat in an international marketplace, choosing daily from Mexican, American, Asian, and Italian food such as chicken teriyaki, fajitas, noodles, and meatball sandwiches. High school students dine in a food court, with fresh sandwiches and salads, burritos, and full salsa bar with guacamole, chopped cilantro, and fresh limes. Most of the food is portable, like grab-and-go salads, so students can take it and sit with friends.

Another way to educate and market is to make nutritional information available in the cafeteria and online for students and parents. Fairfax County's McConnell concocted a green, yellow, and red light system to tell high school students which snack choices are best, which are better, and which should be limited. Baked chips and 100 percent fruit juice get a green light, trail mix and ice cream sandwiches get a yellow light, and doughnuts and potato chips get a red light.

As the complex world of school food continues to evolve and change, districts have shown that it is possible to thrive by offering children healthier alternatives. With evidence mounting that good nutrition is indeed a life-or-death matter, healthy

school food is only increasing in importance.

Ann Cooper, a chef and author who works as a consultant to help districts revamp their school lunches, says it's time to put nutrition education on par with other academic subjects.

Cooper, who calls herself a renegade lunch lady, says

As the complex world of school food continues to evolve and change, districts have shown that it is possible to thrive by offering children healthier alternatives.

healthy diets are just as important as good instruction. You wouldn't let a 12-year-old decide that he doesn't need to take math and English, she says. Nor should you allow the same child to decide he won't eat any vegetables.

"If you are dying of a food-related disease," Cooper says, "geometry means nothing."

Kathleen Vail (kvail@nsba.org) is a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*.

FOOD SERVICE COMPANIES GET INTO THE ACT

THE TEACHERS at Wisconsin's Appleton Central Alternative High School decided to try a nutritional experiment with their students. The students, who had emotional, academic, and behavioral problems, began to eat salads made from dark greens, whole-wheat bread and bagels, and a flaxseed energy drink.

The nutrition program, later featured in the documentary *Super Size Me*, was underwritten by a local bread company. School officials credited it with helping increase students' ability to concentrate and reduce discipline problems. When funding ran out, Appleton Area School District officials wanted to continue the program and expand it through the rest of the system.

To do this, they turned to ARAMARK Education, the district's food service provider, which hired a nutritionist to introduce more fresh foods and grains into school meals. In 2003, Appleton approved a nutrition plan that is being phased into its 25 schools.

"We made changes in all the levels that we operate," says Peg Panici, the district's food service director.

Elsewhere as well, contractors such as ARAMARK Education and Sodexho School Services are responding to customer requests and societal concerns about childhood obesity.

The Philadelphia-based ARAMARK, which serves about 300 public and private school districts, is formulating new

recipes and looking into products that allow schools to fry less, bake more, and eliminate unhealthy ingredients like hydrogenated oil. "We try to press the low-fat, low-sugar envelope," says Carolina Lobo, the company's vice president for marketing of school services. "The challenge is how to make it appealing and healthy."

Companies such as ARAMARK and the Bethesda, Md.-based Sodexho, which serves about 400 districts, have the advantage of bulk buying power. This means the companies often can purchase healthier products, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, at a lower cost than an individual district can.

Most of Sodexho's schools have salad bars, says Tom Callahan, Sodexho's senior vice president for marketing. The company also is coming up with different ways to present fruits and vegetables so children will eat them.

Children are excited by bold flavors and strange colors, and they crave portability, says Richard Hill, vice president of product development. In response, Sodexho created a cyclone salad—a red or green soft tortilla shell rolled in the shape of a cone and filled with chicken mandarin salad, Greek salad, chef salad, or chicken Caesar salad. Children can eat the salad as they would an ice cream cone.

"You have the creativity and freshness on one side, and nutritional balance on the other side," Hill says.—K.V.