



Are Schools Doing Enough to Nourish Students at Mealtime?

by Jessica Pupillo

With growing concerns about childhood obesity, school breakfast and lunch programs are under increased scrutiny. Today, school menus are healthier than they've ever been, but many kids are still making bad decisions in the cafeteria line.

A recent study found that schools need to do more to reduce high-calorie, low-nutrient foods. "School meals remain too high in saturated fat and sodium, and children are not consuming enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains," according to the study that appeared in the February *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. The study, conducted during the 2004–2005 school year, included schools throughout the country.

"Since 2004, school food service directors across the nation have improved the quality of the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program as well as a la carte offerings," said Patty Poretti, director of food and nutrition for Ritenour School District. "We believe we are helping to reduce childhood obesity and are not the root cause of it."

When asked how they've improved nutrition, public schools throughout the St. Louis metro area responded that they've either eliminated fried foods altogether or have significantly reduced the amount of food that is fried, opting instead to bake foods. Most schools have switched to whole grain breads, pasta, crusts and breading. The use of reduced-fat cheeses and reduced-fat or fat-free milk is also on the rise. Fruits and vegetables—whether fresh, frozen or canned—are also offered every day.

Several parochial and catholic schools, including De Smet Jesuit High School, have added "healthy habits" meals to their menu to provide an alternative to the traditional fare, which includes burgers, fries, nachos and pizza sticks.

"Our healthy habits line has at least one healthy entrée—baked fish or chicken, for example—always a cooked vegetable and fruit," said Heather De Hart, director of public relations, marketing and communications at De Smet. A salad bar is also available to the students.

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Raintree Learning Community teaches students about the importance of healthy eating by involving them in meal preparation and the school's garden.

Washington University Registered Dietitian Marilyn Tanner-Blasiar praises schools for making these healthy changes that have reduced fat and increased fiber.

However, she cautions that offering healthier items is different than actually serving them. When kids are left to make choices, they often choose the less ideal food, said Tanner-Blasiar. That's why she recommends schools take more control over all of the foods available and actively encourage students to make healthy choices.

An Ideal Kitchen

Raintree Learning Community in Ballwin makes it virtually impossible for its preschool and kindergarten students to make a bad decision at mealtime.

The independent school of about 30 students has its own chef, “Chef Art,” who creates balanced meals from scratch each day.

“We strongly believe that good nutrition benefits not only our students’ overall physical health, but their mental well-being as well,” said Ilya Eydelman, president of Raintree. “When properly fueled, our students come to the classroom alert and ready to learn.”

Raintree serves organic produce and dairy products. They skip the red meat, and offer poultry that is free-range and hormone-free. The school serves and cooks only fresh fruits and vegetables—some are grown by students in the school garden, said Brandi Cartwright, Raintree’s dean. Because everything is made from scratch, the school has complete control over what goes into the students’ meals. Not only does this help manage students’ food allergies, it also prevents extra hormones and pesticides from ending up on students’ plates, she said.

Not surprising, Raintree’s food bill is 20 percent more expensive than typical fare, Eydelman said. “The small cost associated with providing better nutrition is far outweighed by the benefit to our children in both health and academic performance,” he said. ■