

Secrets to Success in School Nutrition

All school nutrition programs learn new ideas from school nutrition success stories in districts nationwide.

Kids in the Auburn School District tend the school garden.



We all know an empty belly can undermine a student's focus, behavior, and attitude. After all, who can concentrate in the classroom when your stomach is growling from hunger?

But students need more than just *any* lunch or breakfast to do well in school—the *quality* of these meals counts also. Studies have demonstrated the role healthy diets can play in students' academic achievement.

That's why President Obama signed into law the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in December 2010. This historic legislation provides free school meals to more children in need and takes critical steps to ensure that all foods sold in school are nutritious choices.

By Nancy Rice, M.Ed., RD, LD, SNS

Fortunately, school meals have already come a long way. A recent School Nutrition Association report found that despite rising costs and limited funds, school meals include more fresh produce and whole grains and less sodium and added sugar.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act provides essential funds to help schools build on this success while strengthening nutrition standards for school meals and establishing new regulations to abolish junk food from school vending machines and snack bars. (Note: the law

does not ban treats from home or those served at classroom parties.)

So what can schools do to meet these new standards, and how can they inspire children to make healthier choices? Every school nutrition program has different resources and limitations, but all can gain ideas from www.TrayTalk.org, a new Website featuring school nutrition success stories from districts nationwide. Here are their secrets.

Whipping up Change

At Andover Public Schools in Massachusetts, the cafeteria staff has mixed up the menu. Kids can dine on Caribbean beef stew, Greek salads, homemade soups, and vegetable sushi rolls while snacking on fruit smoothies and hummus with pita bread. Recognizing the importance of teaching children about moderation, Andover elementary schools still offer a special treat once a week: items like blueberry shortcake and apple crisp.

The good news is that the district's move to more nutritious fare hasn't hurt the bottom line or sent students packing (their lunch that is!). School meal sales have more than doubled in the past four years in the wake of these improvements.

But not every student is willing to try entrées outside his or her comfort zone. That's why many school districts, including Chesapeake Public Schools in Virginia, have been giving kid favorites a healthy makeover.

Chesapeake Schools prepare pizza with a whole grain crust and macaroni and cheese with multigrain pasta and serve up healthier sides like baked sweet potato fries and brown rice. The district has also increased student consumption of fruits and vegetables by offering precut selections like orange smiles, pineapple spears, and bags of baby carrots.

Many districts have found that kids make better choices when they turn the ladles over to the students. At Gooding Elementary in Idaho, students scoop up unlimited servings of fruits and vegetables at the Healthy Choice Bar, which has been key to more than doubling fruit and vegetable consumption in the school's cafeteria.



Lunch gets a healthy makeover at Chesapeake Public Schools in Virginia.

Much of the produce is locally grown, including tomatoes, sweet corn on the cob, bell peppers, pluots (a plum-apricot hybrid), cantaloupe, and grapes.

The school's Idaho potato bar is also a popular feature, with toppings like low-fat cheese, fat-free sour cream, salsa, olives, chopped broccoli, homemade chili, ground turkey and beef, and cottage cheese.

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Salad bars are a new favorite for elementary school students in San Rafael, California. The bars offer the traditional fresh, seasonal salad fixings, plus garbanzo beans, yogurt, sunflower seeds, and more. Students love the weekly specials too, like an Asian-inspired selection of marinated tofu, shredded cabbage, mandarin oranges, and chow mein noodles.

Of course, bringing food bars to the cafeteria requires more planning than just purchasing new equipment. San Rafael hired two parents who were involved in the district's wellness committee, to introduce students to their new salad bars. They hosted special assemblies, allowing students to sample the unfamiliar fare and teaching them the importance of keeping salad bars clean. They're also collecting feedback and helping the district's food service director identify student favorites.

Getting Kids Cooking

Some school districts have found that the best way to get kids to eat their vegetables is to allow them to prepare and even grow them.

Last year, Willamina Elementary School in Oregon launched a Kids Chef competition, giving students the chance to try new foods, hone their culinary talents, and strengthen their writing skills at the same time. Students kicked off the competition by drafting essays in response to one of six nutrition questions, such as, "If you were Little Red Riding Hood, what would you pack in your picnic basket to help keep Grandmother healthy?"

Essay winners were assigned to chef teams and given two healthy no-cook recipes, all the necessary ingredients and equipment, and a day to sharpen their skills. At an all-school assembly, the teams had 20 minutes to prepare their recipes for local celebrity judges. The audience also got in on the excitement by answering fun nutrition questions from the emcee. In the end, the chef team with the highest score earned Gold Chef's hats and their names on a trophy that will recognize future Kids Chef competition winners as well.

Washington State's Auburn School District keeps students busy in the kitchen *and* the garden. Students are in charge of planning and tending the district's school gar-



Students compete to be Kids Chef at Willamina ES in Oregon.

den, including an orchard with 43 fruit trees. The bounty, ranging from beans and beets to plums and pears, can always be found in the lunch line.

Students in the Summer School Academy make their own breakfast, learn about the life cycle of plants in the garden, how to compost, and the importance of good nutrition. They harvest foods to cook in their lunch each day, and the fruits of their labor supplement the district's summer food program.

Lessons in Healthy Choices

Beyond the garden plot, schools are finding a host of ways to teach children the importance of healthy food choices.

Thomas County School Nutrition Association in Georgia is known for baking its breads from scratch, including whole wheat rolls, whole grain French bread, and sweet potato rolls. If the delicious aroma wafting from the cafeteria isn't enough to entice the students, the school nutrition team is also teaching kids why they should give these more nutritious breads a try.

One cafeteria manager even designed her own hen costume to wear while the children listened to *The Little Red Hen*. Students learned how wheat becomes a roll, the importance of whole grains for a healthy body, and the value of sharing—when the cafeteria staff handed out warm samples!

Vegetables are sprouting up in the curriculum too. Each month in New Hampshire's Londonderry School District, elementary students taste-test a new featured

vegetable and receive a take-home flier to review with their parents. The fact sheet details the nutritional benefits of the item and offers other fun tidbits, like how to grow it in a summer garden and how to best select and store the fresh produce.

Students are also encouraged to try the featured veggie in the cafeteria's more unique offerings. Last October, bell peppers were the key ingredient in mouthwatering dishes like chicken cacciatore, roasted peppers with zucchini and summer squash, and stuffed peppers with beef and rice.

Second graders at West Seaford Elementary in Delaware take good nutrition seriously as well. Inspired by the free, healthy snacks offered to students through a Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant, students launched a unique project incorporating lessons in geography, nutrition, writing, and publishing.

Students researched the nutritional value and place of origin of their fruits and vegetables, wrote their impressions of each food, created drawings of the produce, and worked to compile and edit each submission. With the help of their teacher and the school district's nutrition supervisor, the class secured a publisher for their book *Fresh Fruit and Veggies Rock!*, which can be found in the school library as well as at Amazon.com.

Partnering Good Nutrition with Exercise

Getting kids moving is just as important as getting them to eat right, so more school nutrition directors are partnering with their counterparts in the physical education department to promote healthier lifestyles.

Last fall, Evanston Township High School in Illinois hosted a weeklong Move and Crunch Challenge to persuade students and administrators to try new fruits and vegetables during lunch, participate in 30–60 minutes of physical activity every day, and track their fruit and vegetable intake and physical activity in a classroom log.

Guest chefs demonstrated delicious recipes featuring everything from apples and green beans to zucchini and butternut squash. Many teachers volunteered their lunch hour to assist the chefs, and administrators were encouraged to participate in at least one student physical education class and join students in the cafeteria for a healthy school lunch.

Steps in a Healthy Direction

Changing kids' finicky tastes doesn't happen overnight. But through incremental steps, school districts have been introducing healthier foods in cafeterias nationwide while finding creative ways to get students to embrace these more nutritious choices. For more secrets to healthy school meals, visit <http://www.TrayTalk.org>

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www.schoolnutrition.org