

# Here's **HOW**

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## **Making School Food an Educational Priority**

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**O**ur children are growing up in a very different world than the one most of us knew. It was inconceivable, when I was a child, to think that someday children might bring guns to school and kill people. It was also inconceivable to think that children would develop chronic diseases normally associated with adulthood, such as heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, or that an epidemic of childhood obesity would place millions of children at risk.

Families have changed dramatically in recent times. There was a time when parents and children routinely sat around a table to share nutritious, home-cooked meals. Today, few families prepare home-cooked meals or even eat together, and cooking skills are considered so non-essential that many home economics programs are being dropped from school curricula. Poor nutrition, combined with the lack of physical exercise at home, where television viewing and video games take up an inordinate amount of leisure time, have triggered an epidemic of children's health problems that alarm educators and health authorities.

### **Feeding Children in School**

Today, as schools are being increasingly called upon to step in and address areas that were previously off-limits, the current crisis in child health has a high priority. One area where schools have been able to make an impact is with school meals. Many students rely on school meals, both breakfast and lunch, for at least two-thirds of their daily calories and these meals can have a major

effect on their health and behavior.

Ever since the federal school lunch program began in 1946, it has served a dual purpose: to feed hungry children and to provide an outlet for surplus farm commodities. Until then, many students arrived at school with little or no breakfast, and bringing nothing to eat for lunch. There have been numerous studies that correlate a nutritious breakfast with better school performance in school in terms of both grades and behavior. This is the primary reason why the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which runs the school meals program, has added breakfast programs in many schools.

But there is a problem that arises because of the dual purpose of the school meals program. While the surplus foods that are provided to schools help to defray the costs of running meals programs, many of the foods that are used, such as hamburger meat and process cheese, are not the most nutritious ones available. It's not because there aren't highly nutritious foods, like lentils, brown rice, or bulgur wheat, on the list. It's that schools don't serve them. By USDA's own surveys, less than two percent of children in the United States eat the recommended daily servings of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

### **The Lure of Junk Food**

If this seems illogical, consider that in most schools the meals program operates essentially as an independent business that needs to at least break even. When you consider that of the 53 million students who eat in schools every day, at least half eat the USDA-provided lunch, the enormity and significance of school meal programs can begin to be appreciated. But because of the difficulties that schools face in making their meals program financially viable, the commercial food industry has stepped in. Many schools now have contracts with fast food companies, such as McDonald's and Taco Bell, to run their meals programs. In addition, soda companies offer attractive financial incentives to schools in return for exclusive rights to school vending machines. The health consequences of such industry seductions are major.

There is a widespread perception that children have limited palates and will not eat many nutritious foods. My experience working with children in more than 100 schools has demonstrated the underlying fallacy of this contention. The real problem is that schools do not have educational strategies to promote food acceptance. School lunchrooms cannot be expected to serve nutritious foods with which students are unfamiliar. The lunch program must be educationally supported and coordinated with the academic curriculum.

### **Learning to Love Lentils**

I believe that it is perfectly rational for children to reject a food that they have never seen unless they have first been educated about its qualities and benefits in a positive, sensory-based manner. For example, if you place a food like lentils in front of children and tell them that they should eat

this food because it will promote health and protect them from developing chronic diseases, it is not a very compelling argument and simply will not work for the vast majority of children.

A more successful approach that I have documented is to use an experiential, sensory-based strategy that addresses different learning styles in different subject areas. For example, lentils can be used in science class by comparing the cooking times of soaked versus unsoaked lentils and learning about hydration. Or the lentils can be sprouted and the nutritional value of eating the sprouts can be compared to eating cooked lentils. The sprouted lentils also can be planted so that the growth patterns can be observed. In math, lentils can be used to represent numbers in counting or algebra. For social studies, the cultures of the world that traditionally eat lentils can be studied. A positive introduction of another culture through its food can not only promote tolerance of the people from that culture but dietary acceptance of their nutritious traditional foods. Three-fourths of the world's population does not eat our western diet-and does not suffer from our diet-related western diseases. Their diets are largely plant-based, with animal products used primarily as condiments. We need to learn more about the protective nature of these diets, while at the same time promoting acceptance of cultural diversity.

### **The Cafeteria as a Classroom**

Although we can buy healthy foods from all over the world in most grocery stores, many children are growing up not knowing about these foods. Schools are in a unique position to use their cafeterias as settings in which children can learn about healthy meals and the role they play in learning and behavior. It is critical that principals and teachers work with food service personnel to make this connection part of the student's education.

Eating in school from kindergarten through high school gives students an opportunity to understand at firsthand the importance of food and nutrition as well as the role that food plays in health and behavior. Principals need to promote this knowledge and insist that the foods served in their schools are not simply those that mimic the fast food culture. The school meals program should be integrated with the academic curriculum and serve as a model of contemporary nutrition knowledge.

We owe it to our students to provide them with the educational tools they need to make informed food choices so that they will be able to protect themselves against obesity and diet-related diseases. The school cafeteria can serve as a model for an integrated curriculum that consciously acknowledges the role nutrition plays in health and behavior.

# What Principals Can Do

There are a number of practical steps that principals can take to promote both the knowledge and quality of nutritious food in their schools.

- Tasting parties in the cafeteria and classrooms;
- Classroom visits by food service personnel, nutritionists, and community members to educate students about nutritious, multicultural foods;
- Increase staff awareness of USDA food program;
- Initiate theme days in the cafeteria that focus on foods of different cultures, supported by classroom education;
- Let students experience a formal dining experience, with table cloths and invited guests;
- Develop a school garden of edible plants;
- Support nutrition education programs for staff and parents; and
- Develop a school nutrition committee and policy.

## Reference

Demas, Antonia. *Hot Lunch: A History of the School Lunch Program*. Trumansburg, N.Y.: Food Studies Institute, 2000.

## For More Information

For a list of foods provided to schools by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, go to the USDA Web site. [http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods\\_avail/2003/sy03schfood.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/foods_avail/2003/sy03schfood.htm)

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# Principal's Perspective From Sweets to Soup

*Rebecca Kesner with Kim Anderson*

*Rebecca Kesner is editor of Here's How.*

*Kim Anderson is principal of Whitefish Central School in Whitefish, Montana. He would be pleased to discuss his program with other principals and can be reached by e-mail at or by phone at 406-862-8650.*

Kim Anderson's concern over his students' nutrition came into focus three years ago through an incident at recess. A teacher reported asking a student to pick up a candy wrapper he had dropped. While bending over, three more candy bars fell out of the student's pocket. "Is that your lunch?" the teacher asked.

Seven years ago, Whitefish Central School, which serves nearly 700 students in grades 4 through 8, was viewed as the toughest school in the district. Now student fights are rare and suspensions and expulsions have been virtually eliminated. While there are other causes for this improvement, Anderson believes that a large share of credit is due to the nutritional changes the school has made in the past three years.

Three years ago-spurred by that playground incident-Anderson asked his staff to start noticing what their students ate for lunch. They found that the cafeteria, in order to stay in the black, was selling a lot of high-sugar, high-fat items. The a la carte section of the cafeteria, Anderson remembers, "looked like the candy bar aisle in the grocery store." Because 75 percent of the students bought their lunch in the cafeteria, many were returning from lunch ill-nourished but on a sugar high. As Anderson and his staff became aware of what the children were eating, and started linking it to data about disciplinary problems in the two periods after lunch, nutrition became a critical concern.

Responding to the situation, the PTA and the student council worked together to establish an extensive and healthy a la carte menu, which included bagels, pretzels, salads, soup, and jerky. All of the school's soda machines were replaced with ones that sold bottled water or juice drinks. The PTA also put in a vending machine that dispensed fruit, yogurt, bagels, and salads. There has been no decrease in the cafeteria revenue, says Anderson, "and you wouldn't believe how many cups of soup we sell."

Anderson attributes part of the program's success to the creativity of the food service staff. When asked to switch from selling low-markup candy bars to more profitable items, such as pretzels and bagels, the staff went a step farther and created their own, healthier cafeteria menus. The hot lunch menu now carries food that is more nutritious but that kids like, such as submarine sandwiches and burritos. The cafeteria has also installed hot water machines and microwaves so that students can heat up soup and leftovers.

The staff at Whitefish Central made other changes. Knowing from their observations that, on average, children took only three to six minutes to eat their lunch before heading outside for recess, they extended the lunch period slightly and switched the order of lunch and recess. For the first few weeks, the staff had to condition the students to eat slower, since they no longer had to gobble their lunch in order to get outside. Now, Anderson reports, students are taking longer to eat, eating more, and throwing away less. "Lunch is enjoyable now," he says.

In order to make changes like these, Anderson says, a principal needs to have the support of staff and parents. Planning is crucial and Anderson advises principals to start collecting data six to eight months before initiating change. At Whitefish Central, Anderson got the early backing of his staff and got the word out to parents through the PTA and the school newsletter months before the changes were actually made. As a result, the parents are in complete support. "I have yet to have a parent complain," Anderson says.

And the students? "Well, students at this age sometimes like to complain," Anderson notes, adding, "but kids at this age are going to eat and drink anything you put in front of them."

## **Web Resources**

Here are some interesting Web sites you might want to check out on school nutrition:

The Center for Disease Control has guidelines for school health programs to promote healthy eating habits. [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00042446.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00042446.htm)

CHOICE (Consumers for Healthy Options in Children's Education) is a Web site with lesson plans, activities, and links to other organizations and resources for improving nutrition education and meals in your school. [www.choiceusa.net](http://www.choiceusa.net)

The USDA has launched "Team Nutrition," an initiative designed to help schools help their meals reflect the national dietary guidelines, including the food pyramid. [www.fns.usda.gov/tn](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn)

Be a smart-mouth! The Center for Science in the Public Interest runs Smart-Mouth.org, a Web site that features "snacktoids," brain teasers, articles, and video clips about food and nutrition. [www.cspinet.org/smartmouth](http://www.cspinet.org/smartmouth)