

New School Lunch Menus Stir Debate

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With neatly lined trays full of colorful fresh fruits as a backdrop, Dawn Matthews points with pride to the healthy options available to high school students in her rural school district.

As director of Food Service for the Camdenton, Mo., school district, she's been working to gradually include more fruits, vegetables and whole grains into the 3,200 school lunches her district offers and serves to K-12 students each day. She started figuring out how to incorporate several new foods into menus two years ago, long before new school lunch standards kicked in at the start of the 2012-13 school year.

The new science-based standards, drawn from recommendations from an independent panel of doctors, nutritionists and other experts, require more servings of fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, and allow schools to serve between 550-650 calories for students in K-5, 600-700 calories for 6-8th grades, and 750-850 for high school lunches.

But like food directors in many districts, Matthews is also hearing plenty of complaints, especially from student athletes who crave more options and require more calories. The issue prompted some Kansas students to produce their own parody video called "The HUNGER Games."

"I think our district does a really good job educating students about their diets and embracing the required changes," she explained. "But when you consider all of the changes we've been required to make, it seems kind of drastic. And when you listen to the kids and see more going into the trash, it's disheartening."

While the standard daily lunch fee is \$2.10, almost 60 percent of the meals are offered for free or on a reduced-price basis in this rural district.

Costs, food waste increase

"We are spending more money to purchase these new foods, seeing more waste and participation in the school lunch program is dropping," Matthews said. She wonders aloud if those who drafted the new rules "ever had to actually work in a school kitchen."

The Waterford School District in Michigan also began making changes to their meals two years ago, when President Barack Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010 that mandated the first change to school lunch menus in 15 years.

"I think it's going to be a balance. It is taking a little more work," said Waterford nutrition specialist Doreen Simmonds. "I'm not going to lie and say there have not been nights when I was pulling my hair out, but sometimes you have to work hard to do the right thing."

While noting that backlash might have occurred in other districts "because they took food away," she said meal sizes are not noticeably smaller to students in her schools. "Our vendors changed much of our products to make them healthier, kid-friendly foods," she said, using substitutes like whole grain crusts in pizza as examples.

Congressmen Tim Huelskamp, R-Kans., and Steve King, R-Iowa, introduced the "No Hungry Kids Act" last month to repeal the new school guidelines, insisting that administration's new guidelines "are filling school cafeteria trash cans rather than students' stomachs."

Senator Pat Roberts, R-Kans., also requested answers to questions about the program's implementation.

In a letter to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, Roberts outlined several issues his constituents have with the new requirements, including waste of the required fruits and vegetables as a result of children throwing them away, "insufficient" calories for active students and athletes, and the threat of schools dropping out of the program.

"I agree that improving the nutrition in school meals is a challenge deserving our attention," according to the letter. "However, now that school districts have begun implementing the

new standards, students, parents and administrators across the country are raising many concerns with the new rule."

Agreeing that the mandate overreaches, a National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) policy statement said the requirements are "well-intentioned, but fall short of providing a comprehensive policy for educating students in healthy living."

"Unlike children whose parents have the means to supply them with additional nutrition, especially protein, the children getting subsidized meals have no such resources and for many of them, school breakfasts and lunches may be the most nutritious meals they get that day," according to NASDA.

More than 65 percent of the children eating school lunch and 84 percent in the breakfast program receive free or reduced-price meals, NASDA noted.

North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring introduced the policy statement during NASDA's annual meeting in Des Moines, where Goehring said that an eight-year-old needs 58 grams of protein per day, but the school lunch guidelines supply only 14 grams.

However, the anti-hunger group Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) maintains low-income children are vulnerable to obesity and poor nutrition.

"The new standards are an important step forward in efforts to remedy nutritional shortfalls in children's diets," FRAC stated, noting that the regulations allow hungry students to ask for more fruits and vegetables and expand the reach of USDA's Afterschool Meal Program.

Chairman of the Lake County School Board in Florida Rosanne Brandeburg, said her district of more than 41,000 students had many more students throw away fruits and vegetables when they began experimenting with healthier choices about a year ago. But the school authorities found ways to make healthier food taste good for students, she said. For example, they serve raw celery or carrots with a dose of ranch dressing to make them more appealing.

Brandeburg said her goal is to make sure the foods are being eaten. Regarding student reactions to new menus, "some turn their noses up at it, others have accepted it," she said.

"I think it's going to evolve over time," Brandeburg continued. "If you're in elementary school and this is what you're going to be served, you're going to be used to it."

More food available

Under the new rules, students are still able to purchase additional food items at the lunch counter and schools report that has been happening more often, especially with athletes.

Brandeburg observed that more students are bringing their own lunches in some schools, but "because of the economy," her district has about 57 percent of its students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said USDA's job was to develop healthier school lunches that contain enough calories for the average child in each age group. But they understand some kids need more.

"Elementary kids are having no problems with this," he explained during a recent meeting. "Middle school kids, high school kids are having a problem with it because it represents something significantly different than they've had before."

"We'll work with schools. We have a snack program that they could establish. To date, no one has asked for that additional assistance."

Parents obviously have the capacity to pitch in if their children need more food, Vilsack added.

"If they are not satisfied, they can provide youngsters with resources to purchase more in the ala carte line, or they can pack a snack or they can give their youngster a little extra cash if they feel they aren't getting enough."

"My kids when they come home from school always had a snack. I don't think this is anything new. The fact that some kids are turning their nose up at fruits and vegetables, that's not anything new either," he emphasized. Δ

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