

FEEDING THE COMMUNITY

SCHOOL LUNCHES: LESSONS LEARNED

BY ALLISON JOHNSON

School lunch has come a long way since children toted pails of leftovers to their one-room schoolhouse—but that’s not necessarily a good thing. When President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act in 1946 to provide nutritionally balanced school lunches, he couldn’t foresee the development of a government-industrial food complex that emphasizes quantity over quality, snacking over meals, processed foods over fresh ones, and a church-and-state mentality that separates lunch programs from nutritional education in the classroom.

The results for children are grim: More than a third of today’s 8-year-olds will develop Type 2 diabetes in their lifetimes, and more than 20 percent of the nearly 21 million American children ages 10 to 14 years will become overweight or obese within the next two years. Most staggering of all, for the first time in American history, children born today may have a shorter life expectancy than their parents, due to diet-related illness.

Across the nation, grassroots efforts to change this situation are taking off, and Roaring Fork Valley schools are taking note. From a pilot program in the Garfield RE-2 District to chef-prepared meals in Aspen to smaller advances in the midvalley, schools have stepped up to address our children’s learning potential through the lunch room.

BEHIND THE MENU

Pick up a school lunch menu today, and it reads like a who’s who list of fast food: mac ‘n’ cheese, burritos, grilled cheese, corn dogs, pizza. But “school lunch menus don’t tell the full story,” says Kate Adamick, a chef and school-lunch reform expert who has consulted in the Aspen and Garfield districts. “Macaroni and cheese can come from a box, or it can



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be homemade. It’s the quality of the ingredients that count.”

Challenges with creating healthy menus begin with the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which offers public and private nonprofit schools federal reimbursement for free and reduced-price lunches along with cash subsidies and donated surplus commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In return, lunch programs are expected to be self-sustaining and follow strict nutritional portion guidelines.

“It’s more about volume than nutrition,” says Dave Avalos, food service provider for Aspen Country Day School. “The USDA has more interest in the quantity of commodities they move through school purchasing than the quality.”

A kindergartener’s lunch, for instance, must include three of the following: exactly two ounces of meat or meat alternative, one serving of grain or bread product, three-quarters of a cup each of vegetables and fruits, and eight ounces of milk. No more than 30 percent of calories can come from fat, and no more than 10 percent from saturated fat. One-third of the Recommended Daily Allowance of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories also must be included. Within these seemingly strict guidelines, however, processed chicken nuggets pass for meat, white hot-dog buns pass for grain, and sweetened strawberry-flavored milk is fine.

Challenges exist on the local level as well. Colorado is one of the few states that control the price schools can charge for lunch, essentially limiting how much money a program can spend in order to break even. Roaring Fork School District Superintendent Judy Haptonstall has applied to the state for increases that would allow more fresh fruits and



vegetables to be purchased, but she is mostly turned down even as food prices skyrocket and federal reimbursement rates remain lower than the cost charged for a meal.

The result is an elementary-school program that can charge only \$3 per lunch and is reimbursed only \$2.17 for a reduced-price lunch and \$2.57 for a free lunch. This amount must cover all food, services, supply, labor and transportation costs. According to Roaring Fork School District Food Services Director Michelle Hammond, who oversees the public-school lunch programs from Basalt to Glenwood, the lack of a local warehouse forces valley schools to pay a premium in transportation costs; sometimes they even have trouble acquiring the foods they need.

Staffing presents another obstacle. Typically one of the lowest-paid positions in school settings, lunch staff works only 170 days a year. Turnover rates are high, and most staffers have never worked in a professional kitchen. Training in best kitchen practices, nutrition and healthy meal planning is not offered, even though school staff is responsible for vendor ordering. That lack of knowledge forces them to rely on USDA-approved recipes rather than create their own.

“If you don’t understand what you’re producing, you can’t make quality food,” says Hammond. “If staff were more educated about nutrition and cooking, they would make better choices.”

Even food vendors lack education. Slow Food proponent and Aspen Elementary School chef Katie Leonaitis had to train her representative to understand her school’s purchasing needs. “Most food distributors don’t look at what’s on a label, but if you order canned tomatoes versus canned marinara sauce, you’re automatically eliminating all the extra

ingredients that are thrown in. As long as you stick to whole foods, it’s going to be healthier.”

Open-campus policies and the proliferation of “competitive” school snacks for sale create additional unhealthy options in the middle and high schools, while nutritional education in valley schools—a scant five hours or less a year—is woefully behind the Department of Education’s recommended 50 hours.

“Our job is to teach children and look out for the whole child, but right now schools are not teaching them how to care for themselves or feed themselves properly,” says Adamick. “You can graduate 20 students cum laude, but if they all have diabetes, what have you really accomplished as an educator?”

DIFFERENT DISTRICTS, DIFFERENT CHOICES

Despite this grim picture, regional schools are making changes to improve student health. While no studies have been done that conclusively prove how food affects learning, Adamick says there’s plenty of anecdotal evidence from teachers and principals that serving healthier foods affects academic learning, health and attention issues while creating quieter, calmer lunchrooms and fewer reports of misconduct.

“It’s common sense,” says Adamick. “If you serve real food that’s lower in sugar and artificial preservatives, the body and mind respond to that.

There are plenty of stories about schools who feed their kids better during testing because they know it will increase the test scores.”

One of the driving forces behind regional efforts is the Children’s Health Foundation (CHF), an Aspen nonprofit dedicated in part to eradicating childhood obesity. The CHF began three years ago with a landmark study on regional nutrition and physical education programs and distributed a list of improvements to schools. CHF then hired Adamick to analyze individual school programs. The Aspen and Garfield districts jumped on board and adopted nearly all of Adamick’s recommendations, which included replacing the purchase of processed and



commoditized foods like chicken nuggets with real foods like chicken breast, training kitchen staff on cooking practices such as roasting vegetables and eliminating choices like chocolate milk, which can add 20 pounds of body weight a year even if it's drunk just once a day.

Aspen additionally has embarked on an ambitious multiyear plan to overhaul its lunch program and nutritional education, an effort that got its start through parent initiative.

"We were bombarding them with bad choices, and parents started talking about changing the ways our children eat in school, how healthy eating impacts a child's life and how to incorporate hands-on learning," says Aspen school board president Charla Belinsky.

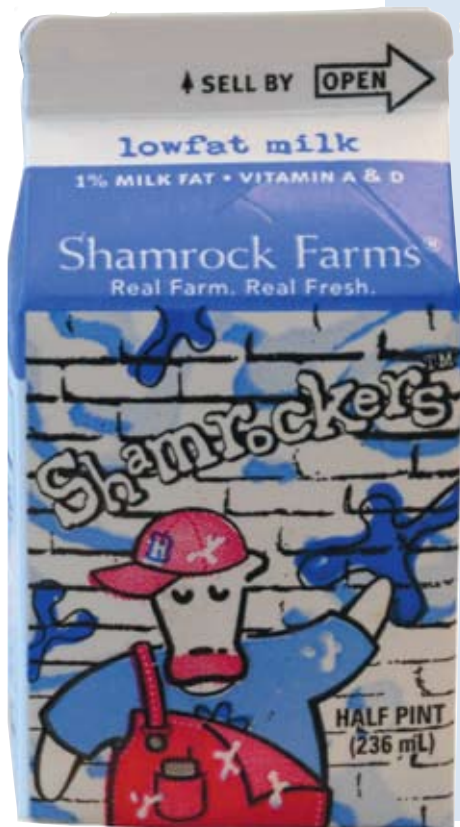
The district, which opts out of the NSLP and charges \$4.25 for an elementary school lunch, has moved from farming out food services to creating an in-house program in the elementary and middle schools with a staff of nine, led by Leonaitis and Mary Whalen. Immediate priorities included eliminating processed foods, sugar, hydrogenated oils, trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup and using more fresh fruits and vegetables, more local and seasonal produce, and, eventually, adding more organic choices.

Leonaitis works closely with Avalos and Pam Davis of Culinary Caregiver Collaborative, which provides meals for Aspen Country Day School. This visionary pair is working with the CHF on a holistic lunch and nutrition pilot program, a cookbook of new recipes for schools and the possible creation of a valley-wide institutional purchasing co-op. The district, which models its program after The School Lunch Initiative at Berkeley, also built garden beds on the Aspen campus for hands-on education and is creating a district wellness policy to spell out its goals.

At the opposite end of the valley, Garfield County schools are participating in CHF's Lunch for Life pilot program, which has donated free salad bars to every elementary school. Changes have included eliminating processed foods, chocolate milk, trans fats, canned fruits and vegetables, à la carte items and high-fructose corn syrup while introducing cook-from-scratch menus, whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables. The kitchen staff also received three days of intensive kitchen training courtesy of the CHF.

"This was key," says Garfield County's Director of Nutrition Services Sue Beecraft. "They were so motivated to get back to the kitchen and use these basic cooking skills, and there's a lot of pride in what they're doing as a result."

Beecraft, whose district is a member of the NSLP, knows other districts are watching to see if the program can be cost-effective as well as healthy. Haptonstall echoes this sentiment. "Part of my concern with this program is whether or not it can be sustainable in the long term," she says. "We want to see a long-standing solution that goes beyond one year."



Until recently, the Roaring Fork School District has held back on making school lunch reform a priority, although Haptonstall is open to changes. Since September, new Food Services Director Hammond has made important gains. Salad bars have been introduced in elementary schools, while chocolate milk, chips and French fries are off the menu. Three out of five meals are now made from scratch, with plans to eliminate all processed foods by next year. Hammond also recently penned an agreement to purchase hormone-free beef from a local rancher. She encourages parents to get involved.

"Our goals are the children, and we're doing our best with what we have, but if more parents expressed concern over the food, things would change. The kids are our customers, but it's the parents who can make the difference."

At the Crystal River Elementary School, parents did just that, applying for a grant for fresh fruit and vegetables from the Colorado Department of Education. According to CHF Executive Director Mardell Burkholder, there are plenty of resources like this for schools to tap into if parents help with the process.

"It's exciting to know kids are eating well, and it's exciting to help change that," says Burkholder, who plans to continue the CHF's work throughout the region and legislatively as well. "The bottom line is, do you want your kids to learn? If so, this needs to be a priority." ☺

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WHAT PARENTS CAN DO:

- Join your child for lunch to get a clear idea of what is being served.
- Contact your district food director and ask how parents can help. Some schools need help staffing salad bars, and all can use assistance with identifying and applying for grants.
- Talk to your school about integrating nutritional education into the lunchroom and offering more hours of it, as recommended by the U.S. Department of Education.
- Weigh in with your school board. Aspen and Garfield districts made their changes only with the support of the entire school community, from board members to the kids.
- Ask to see the NSLP federally-mandated wellness policy for your district and ask how it's being implemented in concrete ways or insist on actionable changes.
- Encourage school staff to be role models and limit soda and junk food in the teachers' lounge, while talking to students openly about healthy choices.
- Practice what you preach. "Kids trust adults implicitly to do what's in their best interest," notes Belinsky. "We need to take back that responsibility."
- Buy items from and donate to the Basalt Thrift Shop, a self-sustaining nonprofit that funds learning gardens at several valley schools. www.basaltthrift.com