

## Questions and Concerns from Parents

### School Meals: Challenges & Opportunities

There are significant changes to the national school meals program due to passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. What will these changes look like at your school and in your district? How can you help support the changes, ensure they happen, and help keep your program moving forward and going beyond what's required once the initial standards are met? Here are answers to some common questions parents may have about school meals in their district.

- 1) **The increase in available reimbursements (6 cents per lunch) authorized by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) is positioned as an incentive for schools to meet the new guidelines. Does that mean that the new standards are not actually required? Will schools still receive reimbursements at the former levels if they don't meet the new standards?**

■ School nutrition expert, Patricia Mouser, RD (*Texas Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics/Texas Association for School Nutrition*) says, "The new meal patterns and implementation timeline distributed by USDA are required beginning 7/1/2012. All school districts will receive current reimbursement levels until they 'Certify' to be in compliance with the new school meal patterns and begin receiving the additional 6 cents per lunch. The additional 6 cents per lunch reimbursement is available beginning 10/1/2012 for those districts that 'Certify' their compliance with the new meal patterns. Districts that don't 'Certify' their compliance will not receive the additional 6 cents per lunch funding."



- 2) **I hear that food services in our district are doing some great things to improve school meals. But I don't see any evidence of it at my school. When, if ever, will the healthy changes occur at my school?**

■ School nutrition expert, Patricia Mouser, RD, says, "Go to the source for accurate information. The School Nutrition Director will know what changes have been made to improve the meals as well as what changes are planned to be made and the timeline for implementation."

■ Oftentimes changes are piloted in a subset of schools to work out the kinks before they are rolled out to the whole district. This can be beneficial in the long run – if kinks are worked out beforehand, the changes will be viewed in a more positive light when they are implemented in all the schools and higher participation will result.

■ It's also possible that the district has foods in its warehouse that were ordered before the menu changes were made. USDA commodity foods sitting in the district's warehouse may have been ordered many months ago, due to the long lead time required for that program. These foods may need to be used up due to budgetary limitations.

■ And the higher cost of healthier meals may mean that they have to be rolled out in steps to a smaller number of schools in the beginning, followed by more schools as the district works to find additional funding and as the newer menu items gain popularity and participation increases.

■ Nutrition requirements and higher reimbursements associated with the HHFKA and the new meal pattern should help move these changes forward faster – however, USDA's timeline varies depending on the meal (e.g., changes to breakfast occur later) and the nutrient (e.g., decreases in sodium levels are phased in over time to give vendors time to reformulate their products).

3) **Some days the lunches at our school seem to be very nutritious and other days they don't. I always hope that my child's learning doesn't suffer on the less nutritious days. Why is there inconsistency in the quality?**

■ School meals must meet some federal guidelines when averaged over the course of a week – not on a day to day basis. This gives nutrition directors much needed flexibility to meet individual school and district needs at the local level. It also means that some individual food items may be more or less nutritious than others, and the nutrition in any given meal can vary. The new meal pattern should help to make this less of an issue with the new, more specific guidelines on fruits and vegetables, whole grains and reduced levels of saturated fat, trans fat and sodium.

### Ask for nutrition information

School nutrition expert, Patricia Mouser, RD (Texas Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics/Texas Association for School Nutrition) says, "the improvements to the school meal patterns are sweeping beginning with the 2012-2013 school year...If you question the nutrient content of the school meals, contact the School Nutrition Director and ask questions about the specific products you question. In many cases, a School Nutrition Director may have a nutrient analysis for each menu. Ideally, if a nutrient analysis is available, it should be posted on the website for consumer access."

Patricia Mouser, RD, LD, SNS

*Texas Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics & Texas Association for School Nutrition*

4) **You suggest that we promote higher participation in school meal programs – both to feed hungry children who are eligible for free and reduced meals and to give food services more funds with which to work to improve school meal quality. I am uncomfortable promoting meals when I don't think they're nutritious. If I consider the quality of some menu items to be somewhat questionable, why would I promote them?**

### Educate other parents

"You can be a huge source of help to your nutrition services department by helping educate parents (who are letting their kids eat fast food and sugar sweetened beverages on a regular basis) about the importance of good nutrition at school and the links between health and academic achievement. The reality is that we must "prime the pump" so to speak for the kinds of changes we hope to see in the food served to kids at school. Offer to put articles in school newsletters about healthy eating. Volunteer to manage a bulletin board at your child's school about nutrition and health."

Deirdre Sullivan

*Parent and Community Health Advocate  
Ft. Collins, Colorado*

■ Your reluctance to promote foods that you consider unhealthy is completely understandable. It's important to understand that "healthy" means different things to different people. On one hand, food advocates and food purists may define "healthy" as all processed foods being removed from schools with only whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables served at every occasion. On the other hand, anti-hunger advocates may define "healthy" more simply – as every kid eating breakfast and lunch, period, because the meals some kids get at school could be their only meals that day, no matter where those meals fall on the food advocate's scale.

■ Realistically, if we wait until school meals meet too high of a bar before we promote them at all, we may not be meeting the needs of our underserved population AND we may not be building the customer base that nutrition services needs to help them accomplish both goals. And we're probably not building the relationship that we need with our school nutrition department if we want them to take our concerns and suggestions seriously. If your nutrition services department is trying to make changes, however small and however slowly, that could be what you promote most heavily. We have to acknowledge the positive changes that are being made in order to ensure that changes will continue to go in the right direction. Keep in mind that it's a step

by step process, and compromise does not mean defeat.

5) **I've tried working with our cafeteria manager for the past year. I've been diplomatic and friendly, but nothing changes and I'm not getting any answers. What should I do now?**

■ Former school nutrition director and school nutrition expert, Patricia Mouser, RD (Texas Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics/Texas Association for School Nutrition) says, "Individual school managers are not authorized to make menu changes at the school level. The school nutrition program is administered centrally by the School Nutrition Director and in large districts, there is a leadership team consisting of the Director and other administrators who work together to implement menu changes for the entire district. Volunteer to serve on a district-level School Health Advisory Committee or Student Wellness Committee as a parent representative. School Nutrition Directors are members of these committees at the district level and work collaboratively with other department heads and committee members to improve the health and wellness of all students. These committees also make policy recommendations to the school board, for the improvement of the entire district."

6) **Our school lunch program is offering some very healthy items now – but they sit side by side with so many unhealthy options. If they want kids to choose the healthy items, why are the other, tempting things, still in the lunch line?**

■ This is a common problem – one that we hope will become less common as the HHFKA and the new meal pattern go into effect. Once again, participation and budgetary constraints are probably the issue here. Healthier meals cost more and may take time to gain popularity, so nutrition services staff may be reluctant to remove less nutritious, more popular items from the menu at first or from the a la carte offerings that compete with the school meals.



■ Share USDA's "The School Day Just Got Healthier Toolkit" with your nutrition services staff (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday/toolkit.htm>). In addition to some great information for parents and administrators, it has recommendations for food services on how to get kids to eat the newer, healthier school lunches. USDA suggests that schools don't give up on healthy options just because kids don't eat them the first time around. Expect that it might take several introductions of new foods before kids start to accept them. Taste tests of new menu items are recommended, and it says "one of the tricks to getting kids to try and enjoy healthy foods is to avoid presenting them against unhealthy options...if we surround children with healthy choices, they will learn to choose and eat healthy foods." Use these recommendations from the USDA as a platform when you approach your nutrition services department: [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday/pdf/tips-foodservice.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/healthierschoolday/pdf/tips-foodservice.pdf).

7) **Our school is serving more nutritious versions of traditionally unhealthy foods. I'm glad that our meals are healthier, but I'm worried about the indirect consequences. If my child thinks it's okay to eat pizza and cinnamon rolls at school, won't she be confused and think that those are healthy foods she can eat anywhere, anytime? She won't understand that the school versions have less sodium, fat and sugar – and more whole grains and vegetables inside.**

■ This is a growing concern as schools work hard to make their menus more nutritious AND cater to kids' preferences so that participation doesn't wane. Remember that no matter how healthy it is, "it's not nutrition until it's eaten." (Brian Wansink, PhD, Director, Cornell University Food & Brand Lab, School Nutrition Association Conference, January 2012).

■ Should all menu items that are perceived as traditionally unhealthy be removed from the school setting even if they can be revised? Not everyone agrees. This underscores the importance of teaching kids and families to

seek out, read and understand nutrition and ingredient information, as well as the specific variations in the nutritional value of foods that may look alike and/or fall in the same food category. For example: dark leafy greens are a better choice than other greens; low fat milk is a better choice than whole milk; some pizzas are more nutritious than others (those with whole grain crusts, low fat cheese and vegetable toppings). You can't judge a pizza by the box it comes in (unless you read the nutrition and ingredient labels)!

- This concern gets more complicated if the school purchases and markets menu items from outside, brand-name vendors. If the vendor has to create a special school version of the product to meet nutrition guidelines, but it is marketed as the same brand-name product at school, children are more likely to get the wrong message about the product's nutritional value outside of the school setting.

- Discussion on this issue is likely to continue as the HHFKA and the new meal pattern go into effect over the coming years.

8) **Our school wellness team has tried working with nutrition services in my district for the past several years with no luck. We've been patient, diplomatic and we've done our homework, but nothing has changed. We're already working on our wellness policy and improvements to other areas in our school environment. What's the next step with nutrition services?**

- Keep up the good work! Keep being patient, persistent and positive in your interactions with your district and nutrition services. Your efforts around the school, combined with the new requirements of the HHFKA and the new meal pattern are likely to pay off in the long run. Even if it doesn't seem like you're making a difference, your voices are adding to the momentum and providing pressure on your nutrition services department to make changes as quickly as they can.

Deirdre Sullivan, a parent and community health advocate in Fort Collins, Colorado, has the following advice:

- "Try reaching out to your kitchen managers about partnering, adding new ideas, etc. Many of them are also supportive of feeding kids good food and would welcome some ideas such as "Try a New Food Friday" (where wellness team sponsors a taste testing of things like edamame, jicama, etc.).

- Build some additions/enhancements into national days like Food Day, National School Lunch week, Earth Day (showcasing local food), etc. rather than demanding that things be taken away first. Try working with Nutrition Services to host events and activities that showcase good food at school.

- Increase your base of support for serving fresh, healthy food in school cafeterias. Don't stop with parents – who else cares about food? Physicians, farmers, local food producers, chefs in your community – bring their voices to the table. This also helps address the issue that we're all in this together – none of us can solve this epidemic alone!

- And, don't stop at the local level with administrative and board members. The same strategies apply at all legislative levels. Call or email your candidates. Provide them with children's health statistics and educate them on issues related to healthy schools. Find out how they stand on the issues. Host a coffee or forum and invite local candidates to answer your questions."



### Educate other parents

"Parents in Fort Collins, Colorado were able to achieve written board of education policy about improving school food by making it an election issue in school board races, garnering support from physicians, farmers, advocates of local food, and more. Experts from the medical field were instrumental in providing rationale about why nutrition in school was critical and how they needed the school district to work with them on curbing childhood obesity."

Deirdre Sullivan  
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