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School menus freshen up

Cafeterias offering more local, healthy foods to students

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Once the province of tater tots, reheated burgers and chocolate milk, school lunches are increasingly featuring local produce and healthy foods as administrators battle rising food prices and expanding student waistlines.

"This is really gaining momentum now," said Gary Cuneen of Seven Generations Ahead, a Chicago-area non-profit that has worked with schools in Oak Park and elsewhere to improve lunch menus and to educate students about food.

A movement that began a decade ago by putting fresh produce into a few California schools is now active in 2,000 school districts in 39 states, according to the National Farm to School project.

"A lot of programs have gotten started off by parents going into the school and saying, 'We need some sort of change happening,' " said Anupama Joshi of Farm to School, a project funded by cereal giant Kellogg Co.

The movement got a boost in May when Congress approved a long-delayed farm bill allocating more than \$1 billion over the next five years for a fresh fruit and vegetable program.

A glimpse inside William Hatch School in Oak Park, which revamped its lunch menu a couple of years ago, demonstrates the change. Students can't wait to show their physical education teacher what they have been eating, thrusting half-eaten apples and bags of grapes into the air for her approval.

School officials say they have planted an organic garden with exotic fruits and vegetables, provided students samples of healthy food items from around the world and asked parents to forgo cupcakes and other sweets for in-school celebrations.

Second-graders now brag about their taste for quinoa—a South American staple grown mainly for its seed—while older children crunch on apple wedges and honeydew slices brought from home.

"The food tastes a lot better, and it's a lot better for you," said Katie Starcher, a 10-year-old 5th grader. "I like the chicken patty. It's grilled and it's served on a whole wheat bun with lettuce."

Josh Zucker, also 10, didn't like the pizza and sloppy joes that made up the old menu. "They just didn't taste right," he said.

Schools often rely on lunch sales to bring in money, and without steady sales, some schools can't afford their lunch programs, according to Katie Wilson, president of the Child Nutrition Association and the nutrition director for the five schools in the Onalaska, Wis., school district.

"One of my elementary schools is 560 kids," Wilson said. "If I put on chicken nuggets and some other food choices, I'll get 525 kids coming through that line. Now we put chicken stir-fry and vegetables on it, we cook stir-fry right there in front of them and put it over brown rice, and 130 kids come through. I've lost all my revenue."

Oak Park is hardly the first effort in the Chicago area to improve school lunches. In 2005, caterer Greg Christian launched the Organic Schools Project in Chicago Public Schools, with Louisa May Alcott School in Lincoln Park as the test bed.

But in August 2007 Christian pulled the program after disagreements with the school district over union rules and other matters.

This year the Organic Schools Project is back at Alcott, a pre-K through 8th-grade school.

Christian's project contributes about \$250,000 toward the cost of the program and receives about \$1 in federal school aid through the Chicago Public Schools for each meal served, according to Maureen George, the project's program director. It serves meals that are about 70 percent organic, she said, to about 75 percent of the school's 460 students. Lunches at Alcott cost \$1.85 a day.

"I'm going to show, through the grace of God, that a holistic approach can move kids to choosing cleaner, healthier food over their usual food every time," Christian said.

In response to written questions, a Chicago Public Schools spokesman said that recent food service improvements include the elimination of trans fats and deep-fat fryers; a universal breakfast program aimed at reaching more students; a sliced-fruit pilot program in 31 schools featuring produce from farms within 150 miles of Chicago; and an initiative to serve local, frozen vegetables.

Some districts have removed vending machines, snack bars and a la carte lines. One 2004 University of Minnesota study found that 5th graders who had access to a snack bar ate fewer fruits, juices and vegetables than 4th graders who could not use the snack bar.

"A la carte is a huge problem," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington consumer group. "We can't have that healthy meal competing with Ho Hos and chips and French fries and pizza on the a la carte line."

Ann Cooper, a chef and director of nutrition at the Berkeley, Calif., Unified School District, has dramatically shifted the food served in Berkeley's schools toward healthier meals. She said that alternating more nutritious menus with traditional ones doesn't work.

"We don't have any competitive foods," Cooper said. "We don't have any vending, and no processed foods."

Cooper said that a Berkeley school district study released this month showed that "kids who go through our whole program eat three times more vegetables than kids who bring their lunch from home."

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