

Chicago students learn how to eat healthier, starting in own classrooms

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May 19, 2010

BY [DELIA O'HARA](#) Staff Reporter

New, healthier nutrition guidelines are in place for next year in the Chicago Public Schools, and other schools are taking steps to make healthier foods available to students as well.

But what are schools doing to get the students on board for a healthier lifestyle?

At McAuliffe Elementary School, 1841 N. Springfield, chosen as the site where the new CPS guidelines recently were unveiled at a press conference, efforts have been under way for five years to educate students about nutrition. The strategy, sparked by an initiative of the Logan Square chapter of Active Living by Design, included cooking classes for parents and the introduction of a healthy snack for first-graders.

That was just the beginning, said Serena Peterson, assistant principal at McAuliffe, which has more than 800 students, most of them from families whose incomes are below the poverty level. The school was the first in the city to offer a free breakfast to all its students.

Working with the Oak Park-based nonprofit group Seven Generations Ahead, McAuliffe began teaching third-grade children about where their foods come from, and bringing in foods "fresh from the farm" for kids to try.

"Some had never tasted a strawberry before," Peterson said.

Now a salad bar in the lunchroom provides healthy fresh vegetables as side dishes for student lunches -- or even entrees, if they like, Peterson said. Some low-nutrition foods like chips have been dropped from school lunches.

"There has been a lot of trial and error. Not everything works. There is a thin line between serving healthy food and making sure the kids eat," Peterson said. "But a healthy lifestyle is now part of our culture."

The new CPS guidelines exceed the standards issued by the United States Department of Agriculture, coming closer to the more ambitious National School Lunch Program of the Institute of Medicine, which was issued last October.

The CPS, with nearly 418,000 students in 675 schools, will offer more and different vegetables, including more orange and "dark" vegetables, cut sodium by five percent annually, and require daily servings of whole grains, three grams of fiber-filled foods and reduced-fat salad dressing and mayonnaise at lunchtime.

Louise Esaian, CPS Logistics Officer, who oversees the district's Nutrition Support Services, said that the new standards represent a massive logistical and financial undertaking.

"We were still using deep-fat fryers. To stop using them may seem easy, but the food still has to be cooked, so we had to increase the capacity of other cooking equipment. We had to invest in ovens," for example, Esaian said. The changes needed to be both affordable and far-reaching, she said.

"It's a big change for the CPS," said Rochelle Davis, executive director of the Healthy Schools Campaign, another nonprofit CPS partner. "They are trying to make things kids are familiar with healthier -- low-fat cheese, whole-wheat crust, more veggies. Also, they are offering healthier choices.

"There is a lot of controversy in the world of school feeding programs as to whether it is more effective to cut up the vegetables and hide them in the food, or to teach kids to love broccoli head on. The district is doing a little of both."

Davis' organization gets the students involved with food, up close and personal, holding a healthy cooking contest every year and enlisting high school students to "taste test" the new menus going into the schools next year.

The Healthy Schools Campaign also works with private schools. There, "the issues are different," Davis said..

Shane Staszczuk, principal at Mount Carmel Academy, 720 W. Belmont, describes a different milieu in his school, but one that still can use information on nutrition and health. At Mount Carmel, a Catholic school in the affluent Lake View neighborhood, "we do have a lot of advantages," Staszczuk said. "Our children have access to a ton of healthy food, and their parents have the economic means to buy it for them."

On a recent morning, Mount Carmel Academy, hosted the younger students from its own student body as well as kindergartners from its CPS neighbor, Nettelhorst Elementary School, 3252 N. Broadway, for a presentation of "FoodPlay." The educational musical, developed by Hatfield, Mass., nutritionist Barbara Storper, travels around the country. The Illinois Soybean Association is sponsoring the Illinois leg of the "FoodPlay" tour this year.

The high-energy play, starring "Johnny Junkfood," illustrates the relationship between healthy food and the ability to perform well in sports, academics and other activities. It also lays out the high sugar content of many foods, and the importance of eating largely from the bottom of food pyramid (fruits, vegetables and whole grains), exercise, and reading food labels so children know what they're eating.

Engaging students in "fun and interesting" ways helps them retain information, and predisposes them to try new foods, says Anastasia McGee, associate director of community nutrition for UIC Partnership for Health Promotion, whose group brings its inventive "Organ Wise Guys" program into 24 CPS schools.

Organ Wise Guys, sponsored by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, uses dolls and puppets to give the organs of the body colorful personalities -- Luigi Liver, the Kidney Brothers, and so on -- and identify what foods these organs need, and why. The shades-wearing Kidney Brothers, for example, explain why they need plenty of water.

"If kids learned in the classroom that a food helps their digestive system, they are more open to taste or try it," McGee said. And, the foods that are being most prominently featured in these presentations are the ones most likely to show up in the new CPS food-service offerings next year.

"Many studies have shown kids who have had a healthy meal are able to learn better," Esaian said.

McAuliffe assistant principal Peterson says that making sure children are eating healthily -- and enough -- has "absolutely" raised academic standards at the school, where ISAT composite scores have gone from 37.2 in 2004 to 71.2 in 2009.

"Teachers were nervous about giving up time from the curriculum to incorporate these things" -- nutrition and 10-minute active outside recess -- but it has paid off in children who are able to keep up with a more rigorous curriculum," Peterson said.

"Not only that, but these kids are happy."