



BRINGING LASTING CHANGE TO SCHOOL FOOD: HOW WE DO IT, AND HOW YOU CAN, TOO...

By Meredith Modzelewski

While it's easy enough to say that children need healthy food – and the right amount of it – in order to succeed, far too many children come to school hungry. A hungry child can't learn or play well, and school food may be her main meal of the day. In the U.S., more than 30 million children eat school food five days a week, 180 days a year – so it's incredibly important that these meals are healthful.

In recent years, school food service professionals have had to face new challenges in providing kids with the healthy food they need. Soaring costs of food and fuel, the siren call of fast food, and financial pressures due to tight state budgets, diminished tax revenues, and a meager federal reimbursement rate for school meals create added strains on school food service professionals as they work to meet standards of nutritional quality.

Strengthening and maintaining the quality of school meals is essential to our nation's future and an important step toward reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity and related diseases.

What is School Food FOCUS?

Today, with nearly three years of experience and real-world results behind us, School Food FOCUS leverages the knowledge and procurement power of large school districts to make school meals more healthful, regionally sourced, and sustainably produced. FOCUS works with 29 school districts and their district partners, representing nearly 4 million children across the U.S. These districts are actively engaged in procurement change, using informed sourcing and purchasing decisions as well as wielding their large volume to make better options available to kids in lunchrooms everywhere.

Some early successes include:

- Saint Paul Public Schools surveyed districts throughout Minnesota and found that a majority preferred lower sugar content in flavored milk. While the volume for one district alone was not enough to convince its supplier to make changes, many districts across the state working together to flex their procurement muscle persuaded the supplier to change the formula for statewide use. The path to success was shared with fellow FOCUS districts and others, providing them with a straightforward “how-to.”
- Denver Public Schools has significantly increased the amount of locally grown fruits and vegetables on their menu, and all produce sourced from growers in Colorado is now traceable to the farm of origin. Menus sometimes even feature

sustainably raised Colorado beef; locally-grown and processed chile sauce, and beans, are under development.

So, how can you and the children you teach get involved in procurement change? It may sound like a tough proposition, as the fundamental work of procurement often takes place in offices, central kitchens, and warehouses rather than in classrooms or cafeterias, but here are some ideas to get the gears turning.

What can teachers do?

Take a long, hard look at what your students eat for breakfast or lunch. Eating with them in the cafeteria once a week, or even once a month, will provide an eye-opening experience to help you better understand today's debates around school food. Where does the food on the lunch tray come from? Why? Who makes the decisions that get it there?

For a deeper understanding, pick up Jan Poppendieck's book, "Free For All: Fixing School Food in America." Poppendieck explains the surprising history and frustrating complexities of school meals – as well as exciting possibilities for their future – in a vivid, compelling way.

What can kids do?

Consider the following:

Healthy Hits and Minnesota Grown in Saint Paul

In Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS), staff members involve kids in choosing new foods for the cafeteria. The Healthy Hits process starts with ideas for new dishes that meet all National School Lunch Program (NSLP) nutritional requirements, fit into the budget, and can be made in the district's central kitchen. These ideas are then tested through student focus groups, and promising dishes are piloted at a single school.

If students like a particular dish, it appears on the menu three more times. If participation numbers are high enough and positive feedback from staff and students continues, it's declared a Healthy Hit and placed on



regular menu rotation. This thoughtful process allows kids who want delicious, healthy food to vote early and often with their lunch trays.

SPPS also collaborates with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy to create “Minnesota Grown” educational materials. These posters, maps, and other visual elements are displayed in lunchrooms, promoting regionally grown ingredients featured in their school meals. Produce is sourced from farms around the state, providing fresher and better-tasting food, supporting family farmers, and building regional economies. The materials show students where their food comes from, with the hopes that this knowledge will lead to healthier choices down the road.

School gardens and local produce in Denver



Slow Food Denver, district partner of Denver Public Schools (DPS), started a school garden program that not only directly engages students in the growing process and brings them closer to their food, but also allows DPS to purchase produce grown by the kids themselves and feature it in school salad bars and other menu items. This year, its first, saw 14 schools participating in the program. With help from adult volunteers, students grew over 1,200 pounds of squash, strawberries, lettuce, beets, and more, purchased for \$1,800 by

DPS Food and Nutrition Services. Since then, Food and Nutrition Services has announced its plans to triple school garden contributions to next year’s menu.

DPS and Slow Food Denver also partner on Youth Farmers Markets, in which school sites set up market stands to sell produce from school gardens as well as from Colorado farms. Students create displays, harvest and sell fruits and vegetables, and, in some cases, manage revenue. Over eight weeks, Youth Farmers Markets sold over 18,000 pounds of fresh produce in 100 separate markets. Through these educational, hands-on programs, kids in Denver have real influence over purchasing and sourcing decisions.

Cooking Up Change in Chicago

Healthy Schools Campaign – a district partner of Chicago Public Schools – has created Cooking Up Change, a contest that challenges teams of high school culinary students to create a healthful school lunch that meets many of the same budget, nutrition, and preparation constraints faced by school food service. A talented group of Chicago chefs assists the teams in preparing for the competition, providing healthy cooking suggestions and nutritional tips. The winning meal is served in Chicago schools, creating an

opportunity to discuss healthy food with students in lunchrooms across the district. In fact, the 2009 winning meal proved so popular that it has become a regular menu item.

Through Cooking Up Change, kids in Chicago are able to learn about, engage in, and shape the future of school food.



Resources

Exciting, isn't it? If you're eager to find out more, check out the following links.

- School Food FOCUS - Learnings from the Lab: [Local Produce](#) and [Milk](#)
- [Saint Paul Public Schools](#)
- [Denver Public Schools](#)
- [Chicago Public Schools](#)
- [Slow Food Denver](#)
- [Denver Urban Gardens](#)
- [Cooking Up Change](#)
- [LiFE: Linking Food and the Environment Curriculum Series](#)
- [CookShop Classroom](#)
- [National Farm to School Network](#)
- [Let's Move!](#) and its program [Let's Move Salad Bars to Schools](#)
- [FoodCorps](#)

Meredith Modzelewski facilitates the sharing of information, successes, and best practices among those working tirelessly to make school food more healthful, more regionally sourced, and more sustainably produced -- and spreads the good word to the rest of the world through social, digital, and traditional media. She may be contacted at mmodzelewski@schoolfoodfocus.org.



transforming
Food
Options for
Children in
Urban
Schools

