

Dishing Out **healthy** *School Meals*

How efforts
to balance meals
and budgets
are bearing fruit



a study sponsored by

**GrowingUp
Healthy**

From The Harvard
Pilgrim Health
Care Foundation



There is an epidemic of ch

Childhood obesity in America.

One in three children in the US is overweight or obese. Many of these children will suffer from related health problems throughout childhood.

Chronic conditions such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol will plague them in adulthood and strain our health care system.

As people become more aware of this crisis, many promising efforts are being launched to reverse the trend.

One area of focus is improving the nutritional quality of school food. As this report shows, this is not a simple task. But with the health of the next generation at stake, it is one that cannot be ignored.

Have you been in a school cafeteria at lunchtime lately?

Unless you are a teacher or food service professional, chances are, you haven't.

So you might be surprised by how much things have changed in many school districts. Today, the best food service departments operate like efficient small businesses, ingeniously serving healthy food that kids want to buy while also adhering to government regulations and balancing tight budgets.

In the midst of these competing demands, it is easy to see how nutritional quality can sometimes lose out.

Fortunately, some innovative school food directors are learning new ways to pursue a challenging triple aim — improving the appeal and the nutritional content of school lunches, *and* keeping the price low. And when they succeed, these teams of “can-do” professionals are also wielding a powerful weapon in the war against childhood obesity.

Not all schools, of course, are there yet. With constant budget pressures, many food service directors feel they can't afford to serve healthier food. Not only is it more expensive to buy and prepare, they argue, but kids aren't used to it and won't buy it: they like hot dogs, not hummus.

It is tempting to conclude that consistently healthy and appetizing school meals are just too hard or too expensive to offer in America's schools. Indeed, even the most committed school food service directors describe their programs as works in progress. But those who have pioneered new approaches can share some key lessons that can help other programs learn to serve better school meals as well.

The School Lunch “Trilemma”

To be successful, food service departments must simultaneously balance cost, nutrition and student participation. This has been called the food service “trilemma.”¹

Most people aren't aware that school food service programs are financially independent from their school districts. Most of their funding comes from the US Department of Agriculture, which reimburses schools based on student participation. Reimbursement amounts vary depending on whether the student pays full price or qualifies for a reduced-price or free meal. Some income also comes from state-level funding (although this varies quite a bit by state), and **from the money kids pay for à la carte food that is not reimbursable, such as snacks, drinks and desserts.**

In order to qualify for reimbursement, the meals have to meet federal nutrition standards that spell out things such as allowable fat content and calorie, protein and other nutrient requirements. Menu planning can be food-based — requiring specific food groups in each meal — or nutrient-based, meeting specific nutrient requirements for the age and grades being served. Local and state nutrition or wellness policies may also affect meal planning, as well as current and proposed federal legislation to address childhood obesity. It's a complicated endeavor.

For a program to be financially successful, it must maximize student participation. One of the greatest challenges for food service departments is to keep participation at a steady or growing rate, even as they try new, healthier options that may be risky in terms of acceptance and cost.

So, with all these competing pressures, what is the secret to running a financially stable food service operation that serves nutritious and delicious food?



food for thought: figuring out what works

On the heels of “**Tipping the Scales In Favor of Our Children**,” a landmark report that influenced key policy changes around childhood obesity in New England, the **Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation** (HPHCF) chose to focus on school food as the next step in combating the obesity epidemic. Continuing the partnership with the **Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University**, HPHCF commissioned a study to identify and profile school food service practices in Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

The intention of the study was to identify the common and unique elements of three diverse school districts that have improved school meals, despite the challenges. We initially screened nearly 70 school districts in the three states that had at least 40% of children eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. During phone interviews with school nutrition directors, we inquired about positive changes that had been made in school food over the past five years, and specifically about the increased availability of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains in the schools, as well as reductions in the availability of processed foods (less added sugar; sodium and saturated and trans fats).

The final selections of the three representative school districts balanced the following three elements:

- selection of one school district from each state
- representation of communities of various sizes and diverse populations
- recognition of school districts that have made significant progress in improving school nutrition

The ultimate goal of this report is to stimulate other school districts to apply the lessons learned from this study to make progressive changes in school food.

The Recipe for Success

This report focuses on the work of three school districts that have made significant improvements in their ability to provide kids with healthy, appealing meals. They are:

- **Massachusetts: Chicopee Public Schools**
- **New Hampshire: Laconia School District**
- **Maine: Maine School Administrative District 3 (MSAD3) based in Unity**

These districts differ in size and locale, ranging from rural to urban. In each community 45 to 65% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. The food service programs in these districts differ in their approaches to introducing healthier foods at school, and in the way they engage with other school districts and community partners to advance their programs. Although they each make some compromises that they could remedy if they had unlimited budgets, **what they have in common is creativity, innovation and strong leadership, particularly from the school nutrition directors.** They generally stay ahead of local wellness policy mandates, and they stay firmly focused on the ultimate goal: doing what is best for kids.

Keeping in mind that all improvements must be revenue-neutral, these school districts employed the following five strategies to increase students' access to healthier meals.

1 cook more!

Pre-packaged foods are so convenient, and — just as they are at home — so tempting to rely on. Cooking more from scratch is a significant undertaking. Homemade food may be healthier — with fresher ingredients and fewer added sugars, fats and preservatives — but this addresses only one of the three goals in the “trilemma.” Two questions remain: Will kids choose it? Will the additional labor and equipment required make it more expensive?

Based on its National School Lunch Program (NSLP) participation rates, a school food service department is eligible to purchase commodity foods through the federal government at low cost. Maximizing participation in these programs is key to controlling the cost of homemade dishes. For example, in Chicopee they use more than a quarter of a million dollars of commodities annually, representing a wide variety of foods — grains, eggs, turkey, beef and chicken. It's financially smart to buy these protein sources in this way, because they are high-cost items. In Maine, MSAD3 benefits from the fact that surrounding districts do not participate to the extent that they could in the commodity program, enabling MSAD3 to get additional commodities that other districts in the state are not using, which furthers their purchasing power.

Additionally, buying basic unprocessed ingredients gives school food service departments maximum flexibility in what they prepare and how they use leftovers. Cooking teams are called on to use their culinary creativity and skill, which can be energizing and empowering.

The cost of labor and equipment associated with more cooking can seem like a deal-breaker to some. But with practice, staff can increase efficiencies as they cook. In Laconia, for example, staff learned to make 75-serving batches of homemade granola with existing equipment while they were already onsite for other duties. It is so much cheaper than packaged cereal options that the middle school is able to serve it with a small topping of fresh seasonal fruit or berries.

The recent American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) provided federal support for school food service equipment such as appliances and other tools. In Laconia, the school nutrition director used \$30,000 in equipment grant money to buy a cargo van for food delivery, allowing one school kitchen to prepare food for a second school and deliver it.

Enlarging refrigerator and freezer capacity also pays off, enabling schools to buy and serve more fresh produce and other products. In Chicopee, the food service department now freezes fresh strawberries during the summer to serve throughout the school year. Larger refrigerators allow them to store enough real cheddar cheese to make macaroni and cheese without relying on cheese powder. The last month of the school year is dedicated to using up the chilled and frozen items on hand, encouraging creativity in the kitchen.



cooking up great ideas

The best food service departments have the freedom to experiment and use their ingenuity to serve healthy meals and stretch dollars. Here are examples from the three school districts profiled in this report:

In Chicopee, managers are often challenged to collaborate at monthly meetings to create economical, appealing and healthy meals and snacks using different ingredients. One challenge to use commodity program black beans creatively resulted in a chocolate cake using black beans – a treat with added protein and fiber that the kids enjoyed.

In Laconia, fresh fruit is available every day. In addition, on the day they make lo mein from scratch, the food service staff also offers canned pineapple chunks. Why? Because they use the pineapple juice to prepare their homemade lo mein sauce, showing both culinary creativity and economic frugality.

In MSAD3, the head cook might receive beef as a large roast and use it in a noodle dish one day, and in roast beef sandwiches later in the week. This reduces waste, encourages culinary creativity, and enables the students to try a variety of different foods.

2 serve fresh fruits and vegetables

When was the last time you tried a new food? It can be hard to take that first bite, especially for kids. Many fruits and vegetables often fall into the “new food” category for kids, and it’s important to give them multiple opportunities to try them. Our three school districts have learned to be patient with the introduction of fresh fruits and vegetables. In Chicopee, new foods are often “taste tested” outside of the regular school meals to see how kids like them. In MSAD3, new foods are always introduced with something the students already like. For example, the head cook introduced brussels sprouts incrementally along with other roasted root vegetables before serving them on their own. Now, the food service can tout using 50 pounds in one day.

The presence of salad bars also encourages healthy eating, and schools can take creative steps to maximize their popularity, including providing students with the freedom to add their own toppings, as Laconia does. In MSAD3, the salad bars are placed next to the registers, so students must walk past them to pay for their meal. Not only does this routinely expose students to the salad bar offerings, but it also means the *a la carte* items and baked goods are located in a less convenient, less visible place.

Breakfast and lunch aren’t the only opportunities to get kids more interested in fruits and vegetables. Through the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant program, the Laconia School District received nearly \$90,000, which enabled them to offer an afternoon snack of sliced fruit for the most at-risk elementary schools. In MSAD3, free fruit and vegetable snacks are available outside of the classroom for the majority of the day at the elementary and middle school levels. This has helped to normalize consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables for all children throughout the school day. In Chicopee, an industry grant also supports the serving of fresh fruits and vegetables.

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CHICOPEE MASSACHUSETTS

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oanne Lennon runs what is essentially the largest restaurant in Chicopee. She is the Chicopee Public Schools Food Service Director, overseeing a staff of more than 100. Together, they serve more than 100,000 meals each month to the district's 7,800 students.

But the role she and her staff play is multi-dimensional. In this urban setting full of students from families who are struggling in this tough economy, these food service professionals are also educators, teaching young people about healthy foods and healthy choices.

Introducing healthier foods to her customers has been a long, gradual process, says Lennon. "You have to be patient, because it can't happen overnight," she says. Nonetheless, in the 18 years she's been on the job, she and her staff have managed to eliminate 90 percent of *a la carte* choices, which used to include all the usual demons of nutrition such as soda and pre-packaged snack cakes.

At the high schools and middle schools, today's main entrée is new: chicken Caesar salad, heaps of Romaine lettuce in creamy dressing with crispy homemade croutons and tender baked chicken on top. To the surprise and delight of the kitchen staff, more than 500 kids select this option over the other choices available, which include a sandwich bar, soup, and chicken nuggets. "We used four cases of lettuce," says Donna Miner, the high school's cook-manager.

teaching kids early

The challenge of getting urban kids to accept that a salad can be a meal should not be underestimated. "**Many of these kids have not had access to healthy food,**" says Lennon. "It is a real learning process."

It's a process that ideally starts when they are young. At Stefanik Memorial Elementary School, Cook-Manager Elizabeth Wheeler says that some kids don't know that vegetables grow in the ground. "I decided to plant a little container of lettuce in the cafeteria, so they could see where lettuce comes from," she says. After 30 years on the job, she's feeding the children of children she once fed. "Sometimes I'll sit with kids if they are struggling with a new food," she says. "I tell the kids who are eating, 'Good job!' and the other kids hear me and *they* start eating too."

Lennon and her management staff work as a team, meeting monthly to share feedback and brainstorm new ideas and recipes. "We work together, but I also empower them to make their own decisions," says Lennon. "I have three schools that make

Balancing healthy choices, like chicken Caesar salad, with traditional favorites such as pizza and burgers, is one of the challenges every school food director faces.



SCHOOL DISTRICT:
Chicopee Public Schools,
Chicopee, MA

NUMBER OF STUDENTS:
7,800

SCHOOLS:
an early childhood center, nine elementary, two middle schools, two high schools and one alternative school

PRICE OF PAID LUNCH:
\$1.60 middle and high school;
\$1.35 elementary

PERCENT OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED LUNCH: 60%

ANNUAL FOOD SERVICE BUDGET: \$3,700,000

PERCENT OF BUDGET SPENT ON FOOD: 44%

2009-2010 FEDERAL REIMBURSEMENT: \$2,600,000

ABOUT THE REGION:
Located on the Connecticut River near Springfield, Chicopee, with a population of 56,000, has a strong industrial base with companies that manufacture a range of products including electronics, textiles and sporting goods. Chicopee is also home to Westover Air Reserve Base, the largest such base in the nation. Once predominantly a Polish community, Chicopee is now home to a diverse array of ethnicities, including a significant Hispanic population. The estimated median household income in 2008 was \$43,634.



Chicopee Schools
Food Service Director
Joanne Lennon has
slowly and steadily
improved the
nutritional quality of
school meals during
her 18 years on the
job.



trying
something new



the team: (clockwise from upper left): Cook-Managers Elizabeth Wheeler, elementary school; Donna Miner, high school; Susan Lacasse, middle school; and Linda Hartbarger, middle school.



shepherd's pie differently, and I say, if it works at your school, don't change it."

Students might be offered samples of dishes the cooks are working on. "We're always testing things with the kids," says Lennon. "Stromboli, egg rolls, butternut squash . . . we add a little cinnamon and a little brown sugar, and it's still not a big seller, but they're taking it more than they used to." That's progress she's happy about.

The staff knows it's important to offer new foods with tried-and-true favorites, so their version of a rice bowl — which is gaining popularity — combines brown rice with white rice. It also includes Asian vegetables, snow peas, scallions and peppers. A rainbow salad combines salad greens with berries and feta cheese, and a dressing made from orange juice and olive oil. Hamburgers and hot dogs are served on whole-wheat buns.

keeping costs down

Lennon's challenge is far more complex than just getting kids to try new things. She must do it all on a very tight budget. She begins her menu planning by looking ahead at what commodities are available from the USDA. "I fill in the menu using all the commodities I can, and then I look at what's available locally," she says. Lennon works with a single large vegetable farm that amasses produce from other nearby farms for distribution to the schools, and delivers them to each kitchen.

Chicopee schools also rent a centralized, refrigerated storage unit and warehouse, an essential tool that helps Lennon manage her budget. It means she can optimize the use of available foods, whether local produce or government commodity. But she's careful not to store things for too long, because "the longer you leave it there the more you pay." Storage fees are just one more factor in her menu and budget planning.

high school lunch is all about choice!



At Chicopee High, kids can still buy french fries or nachos. But most choose healthier options like soup, salad or sandwiches.

a passion for teaching

Lennon and her staff work hard to be efficient and cost-effective, but their real passion is pleasing and educating their customers. Their strategies include the following:

Customize your menu: Lennon and her staff try to balance new foods with familiar offerings the students love. “We have a large Hispanic population,” says Linda Hartbarger, cook-manager at the Edward Bellamy Middle School. “An Hispanic woman in our kitchen taught us all how to make beans and rice.” Joanne Lennon says the dish has been a big hit at the high school. **“Some of them say it’s better than mom’s.”**

Organize food-related activities and clubs: Susan Lacasse, cook-manager at Fairview Middle School, has organized a Nutrition Club to help teach kids about healthy eating. “We kept a food diary for a day to see what we really eat. We talk about how to make healthy choices every day, like what they might choose on a trip

to Six Flags, for example. We’ve tried new foods and exotic fruits like pomegranates and prickly pears,” she says. Now Linda Hartbarger at the other middle school is forming a nutrition club too. And through a grant-funded program called “Fuel Up to Play 60,” jointly sponsored by the National Dairy Council and the NFL, Lacasse’s school had a community health fair with samples of healthy foods and ideas for physical activities.

Trust and respect the kids: Middle school cook-manager Susan Lacasse says, “If you think the kids won’t like it, try it anyway; they just might.” Make it fun — Elizabeth Wheeler says her elementary school is running an art contest about fruits and veggies — and make it look appealing. **“Kids eat with their eyes,”** says high school cook-manager Donna Miner.

Lennon and her managers agree that their jobs are challenging, and they work hard. They compare notes about the fresh corn-on-the-cob they served the previous day, commiserating about the work of shucking bushels of corn. “At the end of lunch, we had one ear of corn left,” says Sue Lacasse. Liz Wheeler says her elementary kids devoured the corn, too. “They practically sucked the cobs,” she says. “We don’t mind the extra work,” she adds, “as long as the kids eat it.”

3 make changes in competitive foods

Classic vending machines — with candy and chips — and *a la carte* offerings typically don't provide healthy choices for students. Reducing access to these foods improves nutrition, but the budget can suffer from the reduced income. Offsetting this takes planning.

Chicopee High School replaced its old vending machines with new ones that offer healthier options such as baked chips, peanuts, and granola bars. The *a la carte* options at the middle and high schools in Chicopee are limited to water, juice, chips and cookies, and in MSAD3, to Sun Chips and homemade baked goods. Those baked goods are intentionally priced high; students can buy a brownie for \$1.50, but for only 50 cents more they can get a whole meal. MSAD3 also boasts the state's first vending machine that offers reimbursable meals, with items such as yogurt, fruit, and cheese. Almost universally, sports drinks and soda have been replaced with 100% fruit juice and water.

As a result of changes such as these, revenue from competitive foods often drops. Indeed, in Laconia the high school's earnings from these foods have fallen in recent years for a number of reasons, including changes in the snacks available. But fortunately, this decrease coincided with an increase in revenue from the comparatively healthy reimbursable meals, because more students chose that option ... which is, after all, the whole point.

Entrepreneurial food service departments can also earn additional revenues by expanding their business outside the school cafeteria. The MSAD3 food service department now manages the winter sports concessions, gaining not only another revenue stream but also the opportunity to offer snacks that are consistent with the same healthy standards used during the school day. The department also caters special events in the district, as does Laconia's school food department.

4 source healthy foods creatively

The three food service departments in our study optimize the use of available foods, particularly those that are produced locally, and show tremendous flexibility in both purchasing and preparing food.

Large districts such as Chicopee use their purchasing leverage to get good prices on healthy food. Smaller districts can aggregate with nearby districts to do the same. Laconia partners with about 20 nearby school districts that serve a total of 60,000 students, and MSAD3 collaborates with six adjoining school districts to increase its leverage.

Working with local farms can benefit both farms and schools. The Laconia food service has worked with individual farms to supply specific foods like apples; it has engaged other nearby farms to participate in educational activities. In Chicopee, the food service operation acquires about 10 percent of its foods from local sources, working with a single, large vegetable farm that also amasses produce from other nearby farms for distribution to the schools. The farm also provides some of the initial processing of these foods and delivers them to the schools in Chicopee.

The delivery of fresh, local produce peaks during the summer months, when the Chicopee school district serves nearly 3,000 meals per day in the community through its summer meals program, and processes and freezes berries for use during the school year.

MSAD3 works with more than a dozen farms within the district to purchase fruit, vegetables, bread and meat, and has conducted pilot projects to blanch and freeze local produce for use in fall and winter. They also periodically prepare a "Harvest Lunch," a Maine initiative that features local foods. Remarkably, this northern rural school district obtains more than 40% of its annual food from local sources. This approach helps to cement the relationship between the school district and the community, and is a boost to the local economy.



So...how do school meal programs make their dough?

School meal programs are not profitable. Just breaking even can be a challenge, especially with the push to serve healthier, fresher foods. This is how the finances work.² In “government-speak,” a district-level school meals program is called a “school food authority,” or SFA. An SFA receives revenue from students and from the federal government’s two major national school nutrition programs: the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP).

About 75% of SFA revenue on average comes from selling “reimbursable meals” — lunches and breakfasts that meet federal rules required to receive payments from the NSLP and SBP. Children with family income below 130% of the federal poverty standard are eligible for a free meal; those between 130% and 185% pay 40 cents; and all others pay full price. SFAs can set their own prices on meals; the average price in 2004-2005 was \$1.60.³

The 2010–2011 federal reimbursements rates are \$2.72 per free lunch; \$2.32 per reduced-price meal; and 26 cents for full-priced meals.⁴ On average, 50.6% of SFA revenue comes from the federal programs, and another 20.2% of SFA revenue comes from student payments for the reimbursable meals they buy.

About 13% of the nation’s school districts contract with a for-profit food service management company to do most of the work of hiring cafeteria workers and preparing and selling the meals. The rest take on these tasks themselves.

5 connect food to the environment and good health

Connecting nutritious foods with a safe, clean, sustainable environment and good health is increasingly important to many districts. In Chicopee, the schools and the food service team partner with the state’s extension service to promote different local fruits and vegetables each month and to provide related academic lessons. In addition, the school food service offers occasional cooking classes for students in an effort to increase nutrition education in their district.

In Laconia, individual teachers and schools have created initiatives to promote healthy eating in their own classes. For example, a second grade class that talked extensively about healthy eating took a field trip to a local supermarket as part of the lesson.

When healthy eating and a healthy environment are seen as interconnected, a robust recycling program is often one result. To reduce food waste and meal-related trash, sometimes students in Laconia and MSAD3 can serve themselves fruits, vegetables, and some hot meal items. Elementary students sit at tables with a teacher, who helps to manage “family style” dining in which students serve themselves from large serving dishes.

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LACONIA NEW HAMPSHIRE

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t 10:30 a.m. the first round of Laconia Middle School students begins to shuffle through the lunch line, trays in hand, looking over today's options. Cups of sliced pineapple are the first choice they encounter, neatly lined up in a refrigerated well that keeps them cool. Next in line are pre-made salads, including today's "special," a Greek salad with black olives and feta cheese with pita bread on the side. There are also ready-made turkey subs on whole-wheat rolls.

Today's hot entrée is chicken lo mein, made from scratch. Friendly "lunch ladies" assemble each child's serving individually, putting noodles in the bottom of a plastic bowl and ladling on top a scoop of saucy diced chicken and a scoop of colorful steamed vegetables. Some kids ask for no vegetables. The server cajoles some students into taking them, but she obliges kids she can't convince. These adults believe food should be "offered not served."

The line ends at an enormous bowl heaped with oranges. Many students help themselves to one, sometimes two. There is milk to drink, fruit-based drinks and water. Kids who want *a la carte* items can choose from yogurt, cheese sticks, hard-boiled eggs and bagels with cream cheese. Baked Sun Chips appear once a week, and twice a week they get a dessert option, such as a Rice Krispies treat or Jello.

Watching it all closely, and moving constantly between the serving area and the well-equipped kitchen in this brand-new school, is Dianne Ouellette, the Middle School's Food Service Manager. Among other things, she's interested in how the lo mein is going over. "Last time we made it from a kit, where the ingredients were pre-packaged," she says. "We thought there wasn't enough chicken or vegetables, and we decided we could do better ourselves. So I bought the ingredients and we made the sauce from scratch."

Not only does it taste better, she says — although she's already making a note to use low-salt soy sauce next time — but it also means the servers can make sure the kids are getting the right amount of chicken and vegetables. Most of the time, anyway.

And that's really the goal of the food service program in Laconia, says its Director, Tim Goossens: balance. "We are trying to do the right thing here," he says. "Every single meal isn't a nutritionist's dream, but overall, the big picture is much healthier than it used to be."

connecting nutrition with academics

When Goossens first arrived on the scene in 1997, the high school snack bar was open all day, selling ice cream and packaged snack cakes, among other treats. "We could make a \$25,000 profit selling \$50,000 worth of *a la carte* items in those days," he says. But with cafeteria-based study halls eliminated, and healthier snacks that cost more and sell less, that kind of profit is a thing of the past. But Goossens isn't sorry. "It's the right direction to go. You can't run your program at the expense of the kids' health."

SCHOOL DISTRICT:
Laconia Public Schools

NUMBER OF STUDENTS:
2,400

SCHOOLS:
three elementary, one middle school, one high school

PRICE OF PAID LUNCH:
\$2.75 (\$3.00 for "salad meal")
at middle and high school;
\$2.50 in elementary schools

PERCENT OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED LUNCH: 51%

ANNUAL FOOD SERVICE BUDGET: \$1.1 million

PERCENT OF BUDGET SPENT ON FOOD: 60%

2009-2010 FEDERAL REIMBURSEMENT: \$600,000

ABOUT THE REGION:
With a population of about 17,000, Laconia is located in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire, a popular summer vacation area. Textile and lumber mills have given way to semi-conductor and machine businesses, and tourism is a significant source of revenue for the area. The estimated median household income in 2008 was \$48,488.



From left, Middle School Food Service Manager Dianne Ouellette, Assistant Manager Anne Marie Flanagan, and Laconia Schools Food Service Director Tim Goossens.



reaching
for healthy

On a typical day at Laconia Middle School, students can choose from:

- Chicken Lo Mein
- Greek Salad with Pita Bread
- Italian Sub with Sun Chips
- Turkey on Whole Wheat
- Roast Beef on Whole Wheat
- PB&J
- Sides of fresh fruit, pineapple and milk



Superintendent Robert Champlin says Laconia's new WOW Recreational Trail is getting steady use. It is one part of a community-wide focus on healthy living.

Superintendent Robert Champlin, who has worked in the school district for 28 years, the last 10 as superintendent, shares this sentiment. Champlin says the district feels responsible not only for kids' academic growth, but also for their personal, social and physical well-being. "In the past it was all about the bottom line," he says. **"But then we began to see the connections between nutrition and educational performance. Continuous improvement is our academic goal and our nutritional goal."**

The district has been willing to back that goal with funding. Goossens says that making the commitment to serve healthier meals meant that, for a few years, the program didn't break even. "The district helped us out," he says. **"It can be a struggle, but it's a good struggle."** He ended last year in the black.

Goossens points to a few key initiatives that help his program stay afloat financially as they serve healthier — and often more expensive — food.

Electronic direct certification: In 2004, Congress mandated that a system of direct certification be implemented for children eligible for free meals. This means that instead of sending free and reduced-price meal application forms home in backpacks, relevant data can be gathered from existing databases and downloaded automatically into the food service program's scanning system; parents receive only an "opt out" letter. Goossens says that in the 2009-2010 school year, the federal reimbursement increased to \$600,000 from \$375,000 during the 2007 school year, due in large measure to the increase in the number of kids taking free lunch.

Purchasing cooperative: Goossens organized and coordinates a buying group of 22 school districts in the region. "Through the group we get the buying power of 60,000 kids when we only have 2,400 in Laconia schools," says Goossens. As a result, Goossens says his costs for food and paper have dropped 30 to 40 percent.

it's elementary really

Older elementary school students can serve themselves from a selection of healthy options. A teacher brings a rolling cart full of the same choices around to the youngest students at lunchtime, encouraging them to try some orange slices, some carrots or maybe some broccoli. Teachers play an important role in helping kids make healthy choices at lunchtime.



making health



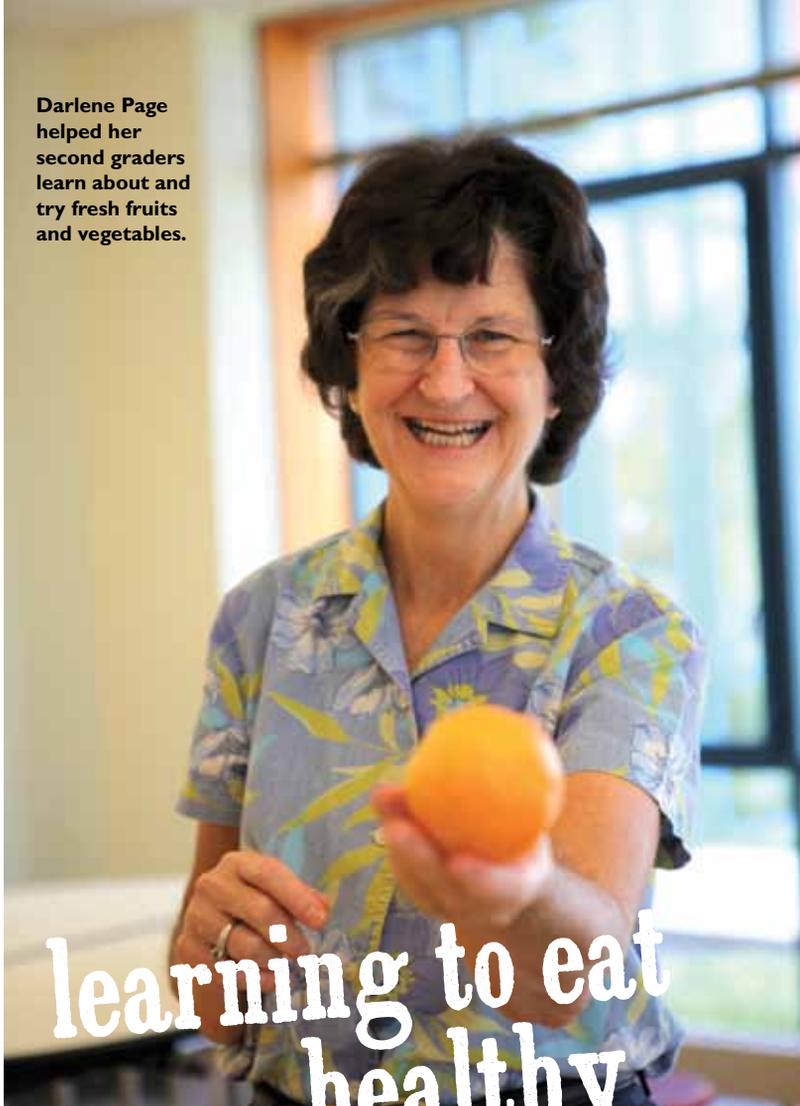
Catering: Dianne Ouellette and her kitchen staff cater district meetings and school board events, bringing in about \$50,000 in revenue. “They prepare restaurant-quality food,” says Goossens, “and they have a great reputation as chefs. People try not to miss the meetings they cater.”

making stone soup

The school system’s efforts to serve healthier food are part of a community-wide focus on health. In May 2010, Phase 1 of a multi-use recreational trail opened in Laconia, the result of public and private efforts. Called the WOW Trail — for Lakes Winnepesaukee, Opechee, and Winnisquam — it is lined with murals about healthy choices, painted by students.

For Superintendent Bob Champlin, the trail represents the value of community partners working together, which helps the community and the schools. “To school districts that want to bring healthier eating to their students, I’d say put together a task force that brings stakeholders together — business, parents, agencies, teachers. Schools are dealing with so much — curriculum, facilities, safety — and I always say school is like making stone soup: how good it is depends on what everyone brings to it.”

Darlene Page helped her second graders learn about and try fresh fruits and vegetables.

A photograph of Darlene Page, a woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue and yellow patterned short-sleeved shirt. She is smiling and holding a whole orange in her hands. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting with large windows.

learning to eat healthy

Darlene Page taught elementary school in Laconia for 42 years, retiring just last year. During her last few years in the classroom she was able to marry her passion for teaching with her passion for healthy living. “Our town’s wellness committee asked if there was anyone interested in piloting a program to teach young children about healthy eating,” she recalls. “Up went my hand.”

Soon she had her second graders researching fruits and vegetables and the health pyramid, and talking about vitamins, minerals and fiber. They took a field trip to the local grocery store to learn how to shop for healthy foods. “The idea was for them to go home and show mom and dad,” says Page. Nutritional information cards were also sent home periodically, to help educate parents about healthy eating.

A grant from the USDA enabled the school to offer fresh fruit and vegetable snacks, and the kids learned to eat and enjoy lots of varieties. They prepared a fruit salad for their fifth grade book buddies. In conjunction with the art teacher, they drew and painted fruits and vegetables. At a school-wide assembly, they performed a lunchtime rap about healthy eating. Parties featured cupcakes and veggie platters.

“The kids loved it,” says Page, “and they learned so much.”



In MSAD3, trays were eliminated in favor of portion-controlling plates. “Real” silverware is used. Led by the school’s chapter of PeaceJam — an international organization focused on service learning — the school’s recycling and composting work have resulted in a dramatic 77% reduction in waste in just one year. The PeaceJam group has also created and maintained organic vegetable gardens on school grounds that contribute to the school lunch program, giving students direct responsibility for farm-to-table eating. Chicopee’s “green” effort, also led by students, has reduced waste through the recycling of milk bottles. Reducing waste is not only good for the environment, but reduces disposal costs as well.

other essential ingredients

The five strategies outlined above are critical steps for food service departments to develop healthy meals and healthy budgets. Here are ingredients that are common to the success of the three school districts in this report.

Put Kids First

Making the health and well-being of the children the top priority is central to driving change. When the food service director, administrators and community focus on “what is best for the kids,” the path to improvement becomes clearer.

Get High Participation Rates

Getting the greatest possible number of children to take the reimbursable meal (whether paid, reduced-price or free) is the most effective way for a school to earn steady revenue and pursue the goal of increasing healthy meals. School administrations can help support student participation by making it easier and less stigmatizing for eligible students to sign up for free or reduced-price lunch.

Introduce New Foods Slowly

Making positive changes requires believing that students will eat and enjoy healthier foods. The school food service must be confident about introducing new foods, must experiment, and must be persistent about making incremental change, a step at a time.

Store Smart

Being smart about storage reduces costs. School food service departments can (1) stretch locally grown foods outside of their seasonal availability by freezing, (2) take advantage of beneficial pricing, and (3) work down inventories of frozen and stored food as the school year comes to a close.

Keep The Equipment Humming

Conducting routine maintenance on existing equipment is critical to maintaining efficiency and preventing costly repairs/replacements. School food service departments also need to budget for capital investments and seek opportunities to apply for equipment grants.

Take Advantage of Federal Commodity Program Dollars

Making wise use of federal commodity program dollars can help hold costs down, even when savings are partly offset by the labor needed to prepare them. Food service departments benefit by purchasing unprocessed commodity foods, focusing on commodities that are protein sources and purchasing commodities that other districts are not using.

Look For Grant Opportunities

Taking time to secure grants and other funding opportunities pays off. School food service budgets can be augmented with funding from community-level to federal-level grants. For example, the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable grant program allows many schools to offer their students more fresh produce than they otherwise might be able to afford. Grants can provide funding for equipment, professional development, fresh food and other valuable improvements.

Reduce Waste

Reducing food waste and trash saves money and is good for the environment. The food service department should recycle food packaging and participate with the community in a composting operation. Lengthening meal times, enabling students to finish meals, would also reduce food waste.

Build Strong Alliances

Building relationships within and outside of the food service department is critical to making progress. Connections with school administration are key for building support for school food improvement, as are relationships with the community. These are often built through collaboration on the development of school wellness policies. Supporting professional development for members of the food service team improves both the quality of the work and the relationships within the organization.

Engage The Community

Involving the community makes the school food service stronger and more integral. Partnering with local farms and vendors, for example, fosters positive relationships and allows for easier local purchasing.

Buy Cooperatively

Partnering with neighboring school districts to purchase cooperatively makes each dollar go farther. The food service department can capitalize on this strategy to increase the purchasing power in price negotiations.

UNITY MAINE

U

nity, Maine lives up to its name. This small farming community takes care of its own, whether it's through The Open Door program that offers free lunch to community members, or a community farm-share initiative that so far has grown 10,000 pounds of produce for a local food program called Veggies For All. **"We want everyone to be thinking about food,"** says Tess Woods, director of Unity Barn Raisers, a non-profit community organization that works to support economic vitality, health and wellness and the rural environment. "We know there are people going hungry, and we have all these farms that we want to support. How can we connect them?"

Cherie Merrill, Nutrition Director for the MSAD3 school district, says it was Tess Woods who helped her bring that same sensibility into the school food program. "Tess really helped me get our farm-to-school program started," says Merrill. "She had all the local contacts, and really supported me in my goals."

Merrill's goals are shared community goals. Now in her fifth year in the job, Merrill says when she started she received significant pressure from the school board for healthier food. "Since the budget was already set, I said if you want healthier food, I need more money," she recalls. "The town voted yes on a budget increase." For two years, Merrill's program — which is now fully self-funded — received financial support from the district. The expectations, she says, were that she would "buy local, get rid of the white bread, cut out the sugary cereals, go to 100% juice, and cut out all the *a la carte* items at the elementary schools." She's done all that and more.

SCHOOL DISTRICT:

Maine School Administrative District #3 (MSAD3), based in Unity, Maine

NUMBER OF STUDENTS:

1,500

SCHOOLS:

six elementary, one middle school, one high school

PRICE OF PAID LUNCH:

\$2.00 middle and high school;
\$1.75 elementary

PERCENT OF STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED LUNCH: 71%

ANNUAL FOOD SERVICE BUDGET: \$904,336

PERCENT OF BUDGET SPENT ON FOOD: 46%

2009-2010 FEDERAL REIMBURSEMENT: \$759,194

ABOUT THE REGION:

This rural school district covers about 490 square miles, with a population of about 11,000, 1,800 of whom live in Unity. Unity is best known as the home of the progressive Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, whose goals include to "illuminate for consumers the connection between healthful food and environmentally sound farming practices," and Unity College, the town's primary employer. Farming, sustainable living and environmental stewardship are at the heart of the region's character. The estimated median household income in 2008 was \$23,566.

oh so smooth!

Low-fat smoothies are a popular choice, made with low-fat yogurt, orange juice, and berries.



starting small, and growing

An accountant by training, Merrill knew how to run a business, but had to take a crash course in nutrition and food management. She says the 2007 Institute of Medicine report, *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth*, really helped to energize her. "I went to every meeting I could around the state, talked with everyone who would talk with me, brought back all the best ideas of my colleagues in other schools," she says.

The program Merrill has built since then — still a work in progress — provides healthier meals for students and pours money back into the local economy.

"We started small, working with three or four farmers," says Merrill. "We bought simple things like cucumbers and salad greens." Then, with Tess Woods' help, the schools began buying whole wheat bread baked by a local restaurant, using grain that was grown and processed right in the community.



not your average lunch ladies!

Cherie Merrill (right) and her staff use creativity and ingenuity to create appetizing and nutritious meals that students really like.

It wasn't long before Merrill started buying livestock. "We have our fourth cow at the butcher's now, and we're only about four weeks into the school year. We buy local potatoes and corn, beets, carrots, whatever is fresh," she says. Milk comes from Maine-based Oakhurst Dairy, with several farms right up the road. **Last year 40 percent of the food budget was spent locally**; this year, Merrill thinks it will be higher still.

Rachel Katz co-owns a local vegetable farm, and sells Merrill a variety of produce. She says that selling food wholesale is not always cost-effective for small farmers, but she feels a philosophical commitment to feed her community. "Selling food to the schools is very important to me ideologically, especially because so many of the kids are on free or reduced lunch and this could be the only good food they get each day."

Although some of the outlying elementary schools have older kitchens and cafeterias, Merrill is fortunate to be running her food program in state-of-the-art facilities that serve multiple schools. Opened in 2009, the brand new school complex houses an elementary school as well as Mount View High School and Middle School.



Mount View Elementary School — and all the elementary schools in MSAD3 — keep fresh fruits and vegetables within easy reach for students to snack on throughout the day.

Fresh salads and sandwiches on whole wheat and whole grain breads are available every day.



The spacious kitchen serves all three schools. The basement offers ample dry storage space, as well as two huge walk-in cold storage rooms: one refrigerator and one freezer.

These storage units are one of the reasons Merrill can buy so much local produce. “I just bought a field of corn from the Amish farmers,” she says. Much of that corn is in the walk-in freezer; it will be served all winter.

The head chef in the cafeteria is Madeleine Cameron, and she is a creative cook who is skilled at devising recipes the students like with ingredients they may not.



Low-sodium cheese pizza on whole wheat crust is available every day.

“She is innovative about using USDA commodities, like putting together government pork roasts with an apricot glaze, which is also a commodity item” **Nothing goes to waste:** yesterday’s leftover chicken gets cut up for today’s pizza.

The high school cafeteria offers a full sandwich bar with whole-wheat rolls, bread or wraps, and a full salad bar, complete with croutons and sunflower seeds. Fresh pizza is available every day. Hot entrees include pork and root vegetable stew, along with roasted beets and greens, all locally grown. The food is so tasty that many teachers and administrators come through the cafeteria line, paying \$3.25 each. Revenue from adult sales in 2009–2010 was \$30,660.

balancing costs

Buying so much local produce is great for the local economy, and great for flavor and culinary appeal, but it’s hard on the budget. Merrill works hard to balance the budget by saving elsewhere, including these strategies:

Take everything that’s offered:

Merrill takes every morsel of commodity foods she gets from the USDA (such as the pork in that stew), and then some. “At the end of the year when the state has commodities left over, I jump on those,” she says. “The state always calls me because they know that, whatever it is, I’ll take it.” She also uses all her “NOI dollars.” These Net Off Invoice products are processed USDA foods available to school food programs at a net price (price after the commodity value is subtracted). At the start of the school year, programs may request pounds of commodity product such as chicken, turkey, beef, cheese and pork to be allocated to them for NOI; the processed results — such as chicken patties — are then delivered throughout the school year.

Reduce waste:

Merrill cut way back on paper products to save money. In a community that is environmentally conscious, many students are already used to recycling and reusing. There are no trays and no throwaway plates or bowls. Instead, students serve themselves on melamine plates, and eat with real silverware. Not only does this cut down on costs, but the plates help with portion control. The high school’s chapter of *Peace Jam*, an international group focused on community service, has organized recycling in the cafeteria, which cuts down on waste disposal costs. Kids even compost their leftover food; it goes to a nearby farm.

Spend less:

Merrill belongs to a cooperative buying group, leveraging the aggregated numbers to reduce the cost of staples such as bread, milk and paper goods. She also excels at finding and

YUM!

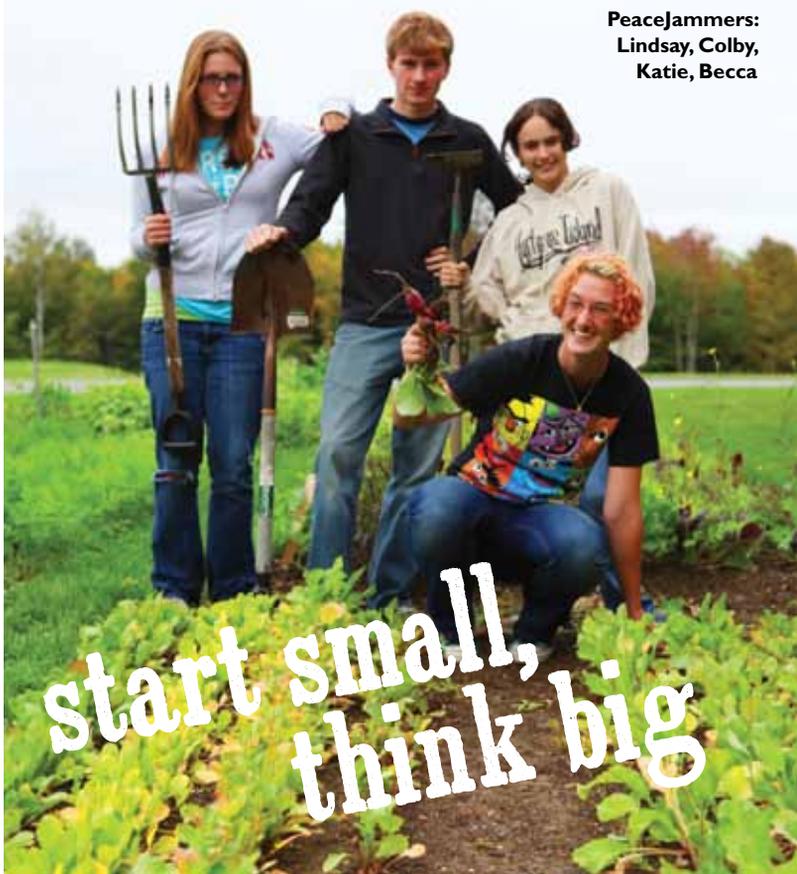


applying for grants. "I read every trade publication there is, and I apply for every grant," says Merrill. In addition to a USDA grant that enables the elementary schools to offer fresh fruit and vegetable snacks all day long, Merrill also obtained a similar grant for high schools, until the funding was cut. She has also received grants from The Maine Dairy and Nutrition Council to expand breakfast offerings. MASD3 offers universal breakfast: free breakfast to every student, every day.

Maximize revenues: Merrill is proud to say that she has the first reimbursable meal vending machine in the state, thanks to additional money available during the school's construction. It is filled with healthy options like yogurt, fruit, and cheese. "Kids who are on a modified schedule and come in late can get breakfast after we've stopped serving," she says. Lunch options are also available. In the 2009 school year the machine averaged about \$300/week in sales.

Merrill's advice for other communities that want to improve school food is to "start at the top. Get the superintendent and school committee on your side. And involve the community, especially parents." "What she doesn't say — and doesn't need to — is that a dynamite food director is the most important ingredient of all.

fresh,
healthy,
and smart



Dumpster diving is not for the timid, and the PeaceJam kids at Mount View High School are anything but timid. To prove to the school how much of its trash could be recycled, they donned hazmat suits and opened about 25 bags of garbage, sorting it all into piles: recyclable, returnable, reusable, compostable. They presented the data to the school superintendent. Now they run the school's recycling program.

PeaceJam is an international organization designed to catalyze positive change by bringing together Nobel laureates and young leaders to create and run service projects. The PeaceJammers at Mount View High School, and their two advisors, teacher Janet Caldwell and parent Cathy Roberts, are so engaged they have been nominated for the organization's Global Call To Action award.

The school's recycling project is just one of their efforts. They also created and maintain an eight-bed organic vegetable garden behind the school, which supplies fresh produce to the food service program. Using donated seeds, the students planted the garden in early spring and came weekly throughout the summer to weed, water and tend their crops.

"We're making a difference," says Katie, a senior PeaceJammer. "Some people might see it as small, but I think it's huge that we planted a garden that supplies organic food to the cafeteria."

"Everything starts small," says Becca, also a senior. "But we hope people will take what they've learned here with them to college, and start new programs. **We all have to pay it forward.**"

The Big Cheese:

the vital role of food service directors

“Lunch Ladies” are not what they used to be. Today’s food service professionals — men and women — must be creative thinkers and skilled at running a small business.

A strong and committed School Nutrition Director is essential in the effort to improve school nutrition. In the three districts profiled here, the directors are respected as champions for healthy eating. More often than not, they have a seat at the table whenever important decisions are made. In Chicopee the director is part of the administrative team, and in Laconia and MSAD3 the director and superintendent meet regularly. Support from the top is a critical element in the pursuit of healthier eating, especially when changes are controversial.

The director also sets the tone for the rest of the food service staff. The best food service departments operate as well-integrated teams. Individual managers are not isolated in their schools, but meet regularly with their counterparts to share and brainstorm new ideas and recipes. Staff feel empowered to use their skills and creativity to contribute to the department’s goals, and are encouraged to try new things. In Chicopee, for example, one cafeteria manager runs a “cooking club” after school that is very popular with middle school students.

An important part of the Food Service Director’s job is forging relationships and partnerships not only within the school district, but also within the community it serves. This might mean creating partnerships with other organizations that share the same goals, or working with parents to emphasize healthy eating at home. Showing up at community events and school functions — being a visible and integral part of the community — provides opportunities for directors to listen as well as to educate.

And of course, there is one constituency these directors and their staffs keep in close touch with: their customers. All of the directors in our three districts make regular visits to their schools’ cafeterias, seeking feedback and ideas about what’s for lunch from the people that, ultimately, matter the most.



“Is it good for the kids?”

These three school districts are the first to admit they are not perfect.

Their communities continue to face considerable challenges, and they work every day to improve. They are not affluent. They struggle to stay out of the red.

The progress they have made did not come overnight; some changes took place over years, or even over a decade or more. But the pace of progress doesn't stop them from continuing to pursue improvement.

What these school districts have in common is the trust and support of their administrations and communities, as well as strong food service leaders and engaged and empowered staff who routinely display patience, persistence and ingenuity.

While it's clear that school nutrition directors need more financial support from policymakers to improve school meals, the directors in these districts did not wait for this to happen. Instead, recognizing that the reimbursable school lunch program is their single most important revenue stream, they worked creatively to maximize student participation. They found clever and creative ways to incorporate healthier foods without hurting the bottom line.

These dynamic leaders also share a singular priority that guides the decisions they make: Is this good for the kids? Not only are they asking the right question, but little by little, they are finding the right answers.

¹ Ralston K, Newman C, Clauson A, Guthrie J, Buzby J. *The National School Lunch Program: background, trends, and issues*. Washington (DC): US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service; 2008 Jul. 56 p. Economic Research Report No.: 61.

² Bartlett S, Glantz F, Logan C (Abt Associates). *School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study-II, Final Report* US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research, Nutrition and Analysis; 2008. 244p

³ Gordon AR, Fox MK (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.). *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III: summary and implications*. Alexandria (VA): US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research, Nutrition and Analysis; 2007 Nov. 36 p.

⁴ US Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. *National School Lunch, Special Milk, and School Breakfast Programs, national average payments/maximum reimbursement rates*. Notice. Fed Register. 2009 July 15;74(134):34304-06.

web resources:

Federal and state websites

Let's Move! — The First Lady's national campaign to solve the problem of childhood obesity within a generation. <http://letsmove.gov>

USDA FNS National School Lunch Program — USDA's site on basic information on the NSLP which includes a fact sheet, history, eligibility manual, reports and links to further information. The site offers a Food Buying Guide for child nutrition programs and farm-to-school information. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/>

USDA FNS Healthy Meals Resource System — An information portal for those individuals working in the USDA's Child Nutrition Program; including recycling, composting, and energy management; grants and grant writing; commodity updates. http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=14&tax_level=1

USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service — This site offers information on safe food handling. http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Focus_On_Freezing/index.asp

Team Nutrition (USDA) — An initiative of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, this site provides training and technical assistance for food service, including an equipment guide; nutrition education for children and their caregivers; and support for physical activity and healthy eating. <http://teamnutation.usda.gov/>

California Department of Education — The state offers ideas for improving participation in school meals. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/he/feedmorekids.asp>

California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) has information dedicated to waste reduction strategies for food service. <http://www.calrecycle.ca.gov/ReduceWaste/Schools/Food/>

Non-governmental organizations

Action for Healthy Kids — Action for Healthy Kids is committed to working with schools to help kids learn to eat right and be active every day so they're ready to learn. We provide access to nutrition and physical activity programs for before, during and after school, and volunteers are available to help schools implement and measure the success of programs. <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>

Alliance for a Healthier Generation — The mission of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation is to reduce the nationwide prevalence of childhood obesity by 2015 and to empower kids nationwide to make healthy lifestyle choices. <http://www.healthiergeneration.org/>

Community Alliance with Family Farmers — This organization reconnects children with local food and agriculture in the classroom, on the farm and in the cafeteria. <http://www.caff.org/programs/farm2school.shtml>
Resources include a "Farm to School Field Guide for Food Service Directors": <http://www.caff.org/programs/FSDguide.pdf>

CHOICE — This is a non-profit that promotes a choice of wholesome plant-based meals and nutrition education in our nation's schools. It offers tips on introducing new foods to kids and action steps that people and groups can take to improve school meals. http://www.choiceusa.net/FS_IntroPFoods.html

Community Food Security Coalition — The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) is a non-profit North American organization dedicated to building strong, sustainable, local and regional food systems that ensure access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food for all people at all times. One of their programs includes supporting the National Farm to School Program with the National Farm to School Network co-lead with the Center for Food and Justice based at Occidental College. <http://www.foodsecurity.org/>

Farm to School — A non-profit that connects schools and farms for healthy school meals. (<http://www.farmtoschool.org/>) Support includes tips on grant writing.

Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) — This national nonprofit works to improve public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and under-nutrition in the U.S., including use of commodity foods. <http://frac.org/>

Healthy Schools Campaign — A non-profit organization advocating for policies and practices that provide a healthy school environment addressing areas such as food and fitness, environmental justice, environmental health, and school nursing. <http://www.healthyschoolscampaign.org/>

National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) promotes continuous improvement of child nutrition programs, including an array of training materials and purchasing manual for cooperative purchasing by school food service. <http://www.nfsmi.org/>

School Nutrition Association Resource Center — The mission of the School Nutrition Association is to advance good nutrition for all children. They provide resources and a network for those interested in improving the school food environment. Each state in the study has a school nutrition association. To learn more, visit the state nutrition association web sites: for Maine (<http://www.mainesfsa.org/>); for Massachusetts (<http://www.maschoolfood.org/>) and for New Hampshire (<http://www.snanh.org/>).

John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition — The mission of the John C. Stalker Institute is to use current research and technology to educate and inform Massachusetts professionals concerned with child nutrition and healthy nutrition environments. <http://www.johnstalkerinstitute.org/>

Smarter Lunchrooms — Cornell Food and Brand Lab's resource site to offer solutions on designing sustainable lunchrooms to guide smarter choices. <http://www.smarterlunchrooms.org/>

Complete toolkits for improving school food

Better School Food — A group of parents, educators and health professionals committed to working with local communities to improve meals and increase awareness of the connection between good food, good health and a student's ability to learn effectively. The group provides a range of services depending on where one is in the process of school food reform. It helps one to address how to get started, create wellness policies, implement new food standards, and troubleshoot problems after changes are implemented. This site has two downloadable toolkits for community organizing around improving school food: <http://www.betterschoolfood.org/resources/tools.cfm>

Center for Eco-Literacy — Based in Berkeley, CA, the center focuses on school gardens, school lunches, and integrating ecological principles and sustainability into school curricula. On their site you will find the "Rethinking school lunch guide," a planning framework that contains tools and creative solutions to the challenges of improving school lunch programs. <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/>

Healthy Schools Healthy Youth! — Center for Disease Control's Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) promotes the health and well-being of children and adolescents to enable them to become healthy and productive adults. The website offers school health resources, education curriculum analysis tools, strategic advice, program evaluations, and policy literature.

The Food Trust — A nonprofit founded in 1992 that is dedicated to developing lasting and stable sources of affordable foods for communities. <http://www.thefoodtrust.org/> They have created a resource called the "Healthy Schools Toolkit." http://www.thefoodtrust.org/catalog/resource.detail.php?product_id=144

The Lunch Box — The Lunch Box is a web portal providing relevant information and the tools necessary to make good food available for all kids. It is currently in beta mode and will eventually provide the materials to address the multi-faceted approach necessary to transition any processed-food-based K-12 school meal program to a whole foods environment of regional food procurement and scratch-cooking. <http://www.thelunchbox.org/>

For additional resources related to childhood obesity and healthy school food, please visit www.harvardpilgrim.org/foundation.

Glossary

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) — Issued in March 2009, ARRA is a federal economic stimulus package. For school food service equipment under Public Law 111-5, ARRA provides a one-time appropriation of \$100,000,000 to School Food Authorities (SFAs) participating in the National School Lunch Program. Priority for the grant is given for schools that have at least 50 percent free and reduced-price eligibility for school meals. The grant is distributed to schools over the span of two years.

Child Nutrition Act (CNA) — The Child Nutrition Act is the major federal legislation that sets rules and determines funding for school-based nutrition programs. First enacted in 1966, it expanded the National School Lunch Act of 1946 by establishing the School Breakfast Program (SBP), extending the Special Milk Program (SMP) and providing funding assistance for school equipment. The 1966 CNA also placed all Child Nutrition Programs under one authority, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Under the CNA, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program are permanently authorized; however, the other child nutrition programs must be reauthorized every five years. Some of these programs include: the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), State Administrative Expenses (SAE), the Special Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and other smaller programs. The current Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act expired September 2009, but has been extended until September 2010.

Commodity Foods — The National School Lunch Act established the provision requiring USDA to provide a minimum level of commodities to each state for the NSLP. Commodity foods, also known as “entitlement” foods, are made available to schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) at a value of \$0.195 per meal for each meal served in Fiscal Year 2009–2010. The USDA’s Child Nutrition Commodity Programs provide entitlement foods to the NSLP, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Commodity entitlements are based on the estimated number of reimbursable lunches served the previous school year. Schools obtain the entitlement based on current year participation. Each state’s entitlements are divided into two groups: Group A and Group B. Group A are seasonally-available perishable foods, such as fruits, vegetables, poultry, fish and meat. States choose items on this list based on availability. Group B foods are price-support foods such as dairy, cereals, grains, peanut products and vegetable oil products. States determine the percentage of Group B commodities desired, and that amount remains the same for the entire year. Schools can also get “bonus” USDA foods as they are available from surplus agricultural stocks. For more information on Child Nutrition Commodity Programs, visit: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/Policy/schncp_policies.htm

Competitive Foods — Competitive foods are any foods sold outside of the SBP and NSLP (7 CFR 210.2). This includes foods sold in vending machines, snack bars and a la carte lines. Current USDA regulations limit the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value during meal periods. The sale of other foods is largely unregulated. Some states and school districts have adopted policies or regulations to limit students’ access to competitive foods during the school day.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans — Developed jointly by the USDA and the United States Department of Health and Human Services and updated every five years, the Dietary Guidelines for Americans provide advice on good dietary habits for health promotion and reducing risks for major chronic diseases. As the “cornerstone of Federal nutrition policy and nutrition education activities,” the Dietary Guidelines for Americans influence both the public and private sectors, including industry.

Food Service Management Company (FSMC) — A company contracted with the SFAs to manage or direct any aspect of the food service. The FSMC must meet applicable federal meal program and procurement requirements as set by the USDA and the state educational agency. USDA’s Guidance on contracting with Food Service Management Companies can be found here: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/guidance/FSMCGuidance-sa.pdf>

Farm to School — A cooperative approach to connect small farms to the NSLP began in 1997 with the Small Farms/School Meals Initiative. The intent of the initiative is to provide access to fresh, healthy food in schools (K-12) and support the livelihood of regional and local farmers.

Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value (FMNV) — The USDA defines the following foods as FMNV: soda water, water ices, chewing gum, and candies such as hard candy, jellies and gums, marshmallow candies, fondant, licorice, spun candy and candy-coated popcorn. Federal regulations allow additional foods not mentioned above to be categorized as FMNV if they provide less than 5 percent of Recommended Dietary Intakes for each of eight specific nutrients per serving. These nutrients are: protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, niacin, riboflavin, thiamine, calcium and iron per serving for artificially sweetened products or 100 calorie serving for other foods.

Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) — Established in August 1969, FNS administers the nutrition assistance programs of the USDA. FNS states as its mission as: “To provide children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet through its food assistance programs and comprehensive nutrition education efforts.”

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) — The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program is a USDA program to increase fresh fruit and vegetable consumption by providing funding to elementary schools to offer fresh fruits and vegetables during the school day and outside of school meals. The program was established on July 1, 2008 by the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-234) within the Farm Bill. All 50 states and the District of Columbia receive an annual grant of 1% of the allocated funding. The remaining amount is allocated to each State based on the population proportion of the State to the U.S. population.

School Food Authority (SFA) — The School Food Authority is the governing body responsible for the administration of one or more schools. It has the legal authority to operate the NSLP. In most cases, the school district is the School Food Authority.

Menu Planning Styles — Schools must employ one of three menu-planning styles to be eligible for reimbursement in the NSLP: traditional food-based, enhanced food-based, or nutrient standard. The Traditional Food-based Menu Planning approach requires specific food groups (meat/meat alternate, grains/breads, vegetables/fruits, and milk) to be served in specific amounts for particular age groups. This is the meal planning style that has been employed since the establishment of the NSLP in 1946 and the SBP in 1966. The Enhanced Food-based Menu Planning approach is similar to the traditional approach in that it requires specific food groups be served in specific amount that vary with established age and grade groups and also reflects an increase in the number of servings of vegetables/fruits and grains/breads. The differential emphasis of this approach helps to better align menu planning with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. School food service operations that choose to use Nutrient Standard Menu Planning must conduct nutrient analyses to plan meals over a one-week period. Menus are designed to meet the nutrition requirements for the age and grade levels served.

National School Lunch Program (NSLP) — The NSLP was established by the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act of 1946 to provide nutritionally-balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children each school day. NSLP operates in both public and nonprofit private schools and residential childcare institutions. The Food and Nutrition Service of the USDA administers NSLP at the federal level. At the state level, state education departments manage NSLP and work with local SFAs to administer the program locally. School districts and independent schools participating in the programs receive cash subsidies from USDA for each meal they serve. In addition, SFAs are offered USDA commodity foods based on NSLP participation.

School Breakfast Program (SBP) — The SBP was introduced in the 1966 Child Nutrition Act and was permanently authorized in 1975. Like NSLP, SBP provides subsidies for schools to serve free or reduced-price breakfasts to eligible children. The program is also administered federally by FNS and locally through State educational agencies and SFAs. Unlike the NSLP, districts are not awarded commodity entitlements based on SBP participation.

Reimbursable Meals — Reimbursable meals align with the nutrition standards set by the NSLP or the SBP and for which school food service operations receive cash and in-kind reimbursement from the federal government. For each reimbursable meal served, the school food service operation receives partial or complete cash reimbursement from the federal government. This applies to free, reduced-price, and paid lunches. While many people are aware that school food service operations are reimbursed for the free and reduced-price meals that they serve, fewer realize that a federal payment to school food service operations is also made for full-price lunches.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) — The USDA is the Federal Department charged with jurisdiction over food, agriculture, and many natural resources. As part of the Executive Branch, the USDA develops and executes policy on farming, agriculture, and food. Through its Food and Nutrition Service, the USDA oversees all federal programming related to child nutrition. This includes the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). The Department's website is an enormous repository of information about school food service operations. The best pages to explore are on the Food and Nutrition Service website (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/>)

Wellness Policy — A law (P.L. 108-265) passed by Congress required all educational agencies participating in a federal child nutrition program to establish a local school wellness policy by 2006. The responsibility was set at the local level so that each district's needs could be met. School districts were required to involve community members in the policy design. The wellness policy was required to include nutrition guidelines for school meals and all foods available on campus. In addition, the policy was required to set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities promoting student wellness, including a plan for evaluating implementation of its plan. More information can be found on the USDA FNS site: (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthy/wellnesspolicy.html>) and CDC's "Healthy Youth" site (<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/healthtopics/wellness.htm>)

Current legislative status

Federal

The current legislation for child nutrition programs, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, expired September 30, 2010. Introduced by Senator Blanche Lincoln, S. 3307 “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010” provides roughly \$4.5 billion in new funding for child nutrition programs over the next ten years. Additionally, the bill introduces new initiatives to streamline access to the child nutrition programs, improve nutritional quality of school food, and simplify program management. The Senate bill has passed out of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee and is now on the calendar for voting by the Senate. The House version for child nutrition reauthorization is H.R. 5504, The “Improving Nutrition for America’s Children Act” and is scheduled for mark-up in the House Education and Labor Committee. This bill provides roughly \$8 billion in new funding over ten years for activities such as nutrition education, establishing nutrition standards on competitive foods, increasing participation through expanded eligibility, and improving access to child nutrition programs.

To find out the latest on these two bills, visit: www.thomas.gov.

State

The State of Maine’s legislation regarding school food was established through Public Law Ch 435 (2005) and Education Rule Chapter 51 (2006). Public Law Ch. 435 removed Foods of Minimal Nutrition Value (FMNV) from schools participating in the NSLP. It also required that all foods and beverages sold on school property must be a planned part of the food service program. All competitive food and beverage sales would benefit the school food service. The 2006 Education Rule Ch. 51 prohibited the use of foods and beverages for rewards or incentives in the school setting; prohibited advertising of unhealthy foods; and set food and beverage vending standards. These standards included the removal of soft drinks, and adoption of a 12-ounce portion size limit for beverages other than water. The food vending nutrition standards set maximum amounts for total saturated fats, sugars, and sodium in all foods sold or distributed on school grounds beyond school meals.

Massachusetts passed a School Nutrition Bill in March 2010 which placed restrictions on the sale of foods of minimal nutrition value and set nutrition standards based on the Institute of Medicine’s 2007 recommendations. The bill also encourages the procurement of fruits and vegetables from local farmers and established a state commission to combat childhood obesity.

In New Hampshire and Massachusetts, bills setting limits on saturated and *trans* fats in schools participating in the NSLP and SBP were proposed, but did not make it out of committee.

For more information about legislation in Maine, go to: www.maine.gov/legis/

For more information about legislation in Massachusetts, go to: www.malegislature.gov/

For more information about legislation in New Hampshire, go to: www.gencourt.state.nh.us

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**Healthy school meals
are a key ingredient in
improving the health
of the next generation.**



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