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Op-Ed

## Cafeteria food fight

*LAUSD's healthful new lunches are better for kids. Of course, not everyone is sold.*

October 02, 2011 | By Robert Gottlieb

Corn dogs and chicken nuggets are out. Butternut squash tortellini and quinoa salad are in.

After years of advocacy by the Healthy School Food Coalition, California Food Policy Advocates and other groups, the Los Angeles Unified School District has revolutionized the menus in its school cafeterias. The emphasis is on more healthful and sustainable food, and the backlash, predictably, has already begun.

The changes have come about slowly. For most of a decade, a loose coalition of groups concerned about children's health and about environmental issues has pushed the district to offer more healthful choices. In response to their efforts, the Board of Education in 2002 passed a motion banning the sale of sodas in school vending machines. The next year it voted to restrict the sale of junk food as well. In 2005, a motion was passed to improve cafeteria food. But implementation was slow, and for years the district's cafeteria offerings more often than not still mimicked fast food.

During the 2006-07 school year, the district purchased \$120 million worth of food for the 109 million meals it provided. But less than \$2 million of that went to buy fresh fruits and vegetables.

Now that is changing too. With a new, more health-oriented school food management team, purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables increased by 2010 to \$20 million of the \$100 million spent by the district on food.

That same year, a new food procurement approach was established. Instead of relying as much on commodity foods from the government and single-item purchases, new vendors or suppliers were selected in part on the basis of their ability to increase the portion of fresh fruits and vegetables supplied by farmers operating within a 200-mile range. Costs for the food purchased with this goal in mind turned out to be lower.

Even more dramatic have been the menu changes introduced this fall. Out are the canned cherries and apples that went into sugar-laden desserts. Flavored milk is no longer offered. Cafeterias now feature fresh local apples and strawberries and plain, low-fat milk. Hyper-refined mac and cheese and fatty, cheese-laden pizza have been replaced with more healthful entrees. And the new menu items reflect the region's cultural diversity, with offerings such as tamales filled with vegetables, vegetarian sushi and Greek salad.

To ensure that the new items would appeal to those who are eating them, thousands of students were enlisted to participate in taste tests, and the district held dozens of menu-focused input sessions with parents. Based on the feedback, some items, such as beef soft tacos, have been eliminated. Others, such as the tamales, have been incorporated into menus because of positive feedback.

The changes have certainly been noticed. In just a few weeks since the start of the school year, the district has received more than 5,000 emails and letters about the new menus, with about half supportive and half critical or concerned.

In feedback sessions arranged by the Healthy Food School Coalition, kids have told the district what they didn't like, such as a beef stew with vegetables. The reduced salt and sugar has clearly had an impact, causing several students to say that the food "tastes different."

Some critics have accused the district of creating an "elitist" menu. One principal complained that it was a "chef's menu," while a parent argued that the food was "better than what the students should be getting." Attempting to develop more cultural diversity caused one parent to complain that the district was not serving "American food," while another argued that the food was "too much what the people in Los Angeles look like."

This kind of criticism was to be expected. Weaning students from unhealthy fast-food diets is not going to be easy. It will require continuous feedback and engagement with students and parents about what the new menus represent and how to improve them. The district will also be doing a food waste analysis to see what is and isn't popular. Still, early indications are that students are embracing the new choices.

LAUSD school food used to be celebrated primarily for being the cheapest food one could buy. Today, without increasing the cost of its offerings, the district is also developing a reputation for being on the cutting edge of a revolution in school food. It is offering a far greater proportion of healthful, sustainably grown food, and it is doing so for a school population in which 80% of all students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches because they come from families close to or below the poverty line.

Getting students and their families to accept new kinds of offerings while the dominant food culture still leans toward fast food is an enormous challenge. But in a city where obesity and diabetes present huge public health challenges, change is crucial.

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