



With budgets as tight as regulations are abundant, school foodservice directors start the year with energy, enthusiasm, good intentions and a desk full of innovative ideas.

By Cheryl Sternman Rule,
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As another academic year unfolds, school foodservice directors are bracing for what's in store: calls for more-healthy fare, climbing food costs and requests for more excitement and variety in the cafeteria. None of the challenges is new, but each is more acute this fall. Fortunately, many K-12 operators are now a step ahead of the game, having crafted strategies to both meet their young customers' evolving needs and cut costs without sacrificing nutrition or quality.

STRONG EMPHASIS ON HEALTH AND NUTRITION

With wellness policies in place and new initiatives under way to hold down fat and calorie counts, many school foodservice operators already are exceeding local and federal nutrition requirements. Executive Chef Jorge Collazo of the New York City Department of Education, which serves more than 860,000 meals each day, reformulates products constantly to boost their nutritional value. "Right now, sodium and fiber are the two big-ticket issues," he says. Collazo and the department of education pushed several years ago to move to a trans-fat-free menu, and now they're looking to reduce sodium and increase fiber content in menu items wherever possible. "New York City can leverage its size and buying power to get companies to step up their [health] efforts," says Collazo. At the same time, he concedes, more-healthy food generally costs more, creating a different set of challenges. "It's a constant balancing act," he says.

In rural Gainesboro, Tenn., Jackson County Schools' Brenda Hawkins treads carefully as she chooses new menu items, especially those that slant fully to the

Benson Polytechnic High School in Portland, Ore., will begin serving an all-locally-sourced "farmers plate" lunch once a month this year, thanks to a grant from a community fund.

healthful side. "I'm seeing more interest in fresh salads," she says, "but the bean-sprout culture hasn't gotten here yet." As the school nutrition program supervisor, Hawkins has overseen the relatively easy transition to using whole-wheat bread and whole-grain rolls and pizza crusts. She has employed a gradual bait-and-switch with french fries, mixing in baked with regular fries over the course of three years and slowly increasing the proportion to favor the baked fries. "I have a philosophy of moving in small steps to achieve results," Hawkins says. She also developed the KISS Off Fat healthy-living program, one highlight of which has been the addition outside of schools' main cafeterias of a cold bar offering cereal and milk, premade salads, sandwich trimmings, fruit, yogurt and cottage cheese. Students can bypass the main line and opt instead for this lighter, grab-and-go fare.

Forsyth County Schools students in Cumming, Ga., see a special symbol at the point of service next to a weekly "star" fruit or vegetable. Framed displays on the serving line offer nutrition infor-

mation and trivia for the item to highlight it further. Susan Woods, director of food and nutrition services, says this extra effort—also expressed via newsletters and an "Eat Healthy" logo on staff aprons and uniforms—has helped emphasize a commitment to student nutrition. The work hasn't gone unnoticed: Forsyth County Schools received a USDA Best Practices Award in 2007. For the 2008-2009 school year, the district is adding more whole-grain and low-sugar cereals at breakfast and expanding vegetarian entrée selections at lunch.

ACCOMMODATING DIVERSE STUDENT BODIES

Operators are quick to acknowledge that standbys such as chicken nuggets, pizza and hamburgers continue to exert a strong pull over students. But even as many students cling to the familiar, food-service operators are branching out to diversify their menus.

High school students at Wayne Township Schools in Indianapolis have been enjoying a made-to-order sandwich bar for some time, but soon they will also get a burrito bar with chicken-fajita meat, taco meat, black and pinto beans, assorted fresh vegetable toppings and salsa. Food Services Director Sara Gasiorowski will model the bar after those found at



FOREVER FAVORITES

79%

Percent of school foodservice operators who name french fries and chicken nuggets as best sellers, placing them atop the list of best-selling menu items.

(Source: R&I 2007 Menu Census)

popular fast-casual Mexican concepts.

Given the diversity of her customer base—28% of students are Hispanic, 30% are African American and 30% are Caucasian ("with 30 different languages spoken in our district," she says)—Gasiorowski wants to offer wide-ranging options. Items made with pork are identified with a symbol so that students who follow dietary restrictions can avoid them; vegetarian options always are > 48



Best in Show

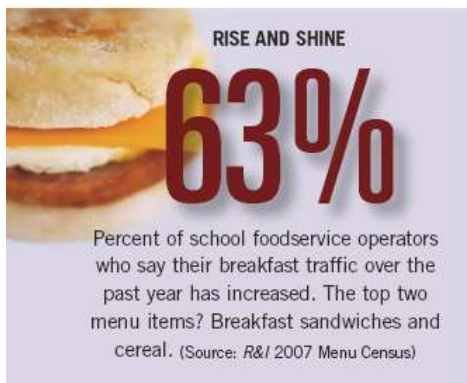
Armed with grant money and a partnership with the local health department, the Pinellas County School District in Largo, Fla., has implemented a unique program to get teens interested in the connections between health, cooking and school food. School nutrition educator Catherine Gerard and colleagues combined forces with two local chef organizations to produce a teen-focused cooking show that was shown on the school district's local cable channel. Gerard and a colleague provided nutrition analysis for the items that students and chefs prepared on the show and crafted the Health Tip of the Month, which is displayed in schools' cafeterias, around the featured foods.

In addition, last spring the district set up weekly farmers-market displays in elementary schools and stocked the displays with unusual fruits and vegetables to which students might not otherwise be exposed. They assemble sample cups with sliced kiwi, for example, so students can see the seed patterns and become familiar with the vitamin- and fiber-rich fruit. "We're trying to increase awareness and encourage acceptance," Gerard explains. "They touch the seeds of a papaya and smell fresh ginger. We talk to them about how broccoli is a flower and a carrot is a root. It's a teachable moment."

School foodservice as an industry tends to be very self-focused, Gerard says. "By partnering with other disciplines—our teachers, our P.E. department, our school nurses—we can better market our program," she says. "Besides providing meals, they don't realize what a positive resource foodservice can be."



Bay Vista Elementary in Pinellas County, Fla., hosts farmers-market displays.



<47 available; and hot sauce and other flavorful condiments are set out each day. "They put hot sauce on everything," Gasiorowski says of the students. "They love hot and spicy chicken sandwiches, too—the hotter the better."

In New York City, when Greek-style gyros are served, students can go to the "gyro bistro," where they find lower-fat and reduced-sodium meat along with lettuce, tomatoes and other fresh fixings. "It combats menu fatigue, and our marketing department builds thematic promotional material to go along with it," Collazo says. The same holds true when cafeterias serve an Asian-inspired meal. The names and flavors, he says, "appeal to the more-sophisticated young people."

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Adding to the difficulty of meeting demands of students, parents and regulators are skyrocketing food costs, which are wreaking havoc with many school budgets. "Food costs are the No. 1 challenge right now," says Erik Peterson, director of public awareness for the School Nutrition Association, an Alexandria, Va.-based not-for-profit advocacy organization. "But most foodservice directors say they're trying really hard not to compromise nutritional integrity."

So how are directors coping with costs while still providing nutritionally sound menu items? Some are choosing less-expensive fresh fruits—oranges, for example—over more-expensive ones.

Even apples, which sometimes cost two cents more per piece than oranges, can be an indulgence, Peterson says. Some districts, including the School District of Onalaska, Wis., are cutting back on non-food items such as napkins, issuing them to students rather than leaving canisters on the tables. Gasiorowski in Indianapolis is holding off on new equipment purchases, reverting to the use of permanent dishware rather than disposables ("our dish machines weren't being used to capacity anyway," she says) and cutting back on staff development days. "They understand," Gasiorowski says of her employees. "I told them last spring that when our milk price went up 26% and whole-grain bread went up 20%, our first priority was our menu. Everybody has a positive attitude about not compromising standards."

New York City's Collazo has tweaked his schools' menu selection (switching to a lower-cost pizza, for example) and tightened up training in the field. He's focusing on efficient practices and removing some more-expensive brand items while

still maintaining high nutritional quality. "Healthy food costs more," he says. "But we're fortunate in New York City that our administration is committed to our program."

In Florida, nutrition educator Catherine Gerard of the Pinellas County Schools scrutinizes each bid even more carefully than she did in past years. Jackson County Schools' Brenda Hawkins is considering reining in portion sizes, which have tended to be on the larger side. "We may begin serving to the guidelines more than we have in the past," she says. "The South is known for larger portions, but we may bring them more in line with what's standard." In addition, Hawkins won't be filling retirement-induced vacancies "unless absolutely necessary" and, like others, is cutting back on the use of disposables as well.

"I'm not willing to sacrifice nutritional quality," she says, echoing the views of her colleagues nationwide. "Challenges excite me, and this is going to be an exciting year."



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Oregon Trail

Two public school districts in Oregon recently received grants to pilot farm-to-school programs for the 2008-2009 school year. The grants, given by the Kaiser Permanente Community Fund at the Northwest Health Foundation, will be administered by Portland, Ore.-based Ecotrust, a conservation-focused not-for-profit group.

Portland Public Schools—a large, urban district with more than 40,000 students—is one of the grant recipients. Foodservice director Kristy Obbink couldn't be more excited about the opportunities that come with the grant. Once a month, the district will offer an entirely locally sourced lunch dubbed "farmers' plate." On the selected day, hamburgers will come from grass-fed, hormone-free, naturally raised beef from a local farm; buns will be baked from flour that was produced in the Northwest using sustainable practices; and cheese to top the burgers will come from local

cheesemakers. Students will have the chance to go on field trips to nearby farms, and teachers will present lessons that complement the event. "The community will get involved, too," Obbink says. "If we serve lemon cucumbers, the grocery stores will work with us to promote them at the same time." The goal is to forge links among the school, the home and the community.

Portland Public Schools' one-year grant will include reimbursements of 7 cents per meal, or \$160,000 over the course of the year. At the end of the year, the district will analyze whether the concept helped boost participation rates. If so, Obbink says she will take the district's findings to the state capital to ask the legislature for increased school-lunch funding.

Obbink hopes the community partnerships will remain strong after the grant expires. "Whenever we have a partner request, we'll gladly do it," she says. "We can't do [this] alone."