

California Schools Move Ahead With Healthier Meals Despite Backtrack In Congress



■ Sue Frey | First Posted: 11/29/11 02:44 PM ET Updated: 11/29/11 03:09 PM ET

This story comes to us courtesy of California's EdSource Extra.

A week after Congress backtracked on some key components of landmark school nutrition legislation, nutrition advocates are saying that the battle for healthy school food needs to be fought district by district, along the lines of what several California districts are already doing.

Last year, Congress passed the [Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act](#), which required school meals to have more whole grains, fruits and vegetables and less salt and fewer calories in an effort to combat childhood obesity and the early onset of diabetes in children.

But last week a Senate and House conference committee, under pressure from some food industry lobbyists, blocked implementation of some of the new regulations. As things currently stand, the tomato sauce on pizza will count as a full serving of a vegetable and potatoes (typically french fries) can be served every day instead of restricted to two days.

"The federal government is living in some alternate universe while America's kids grow sicker and fatter in the real world," said Amy Kalafa, author of a book on the subject titled [Lunch Wars](#). "This is just another example of why we need to fight this battle on the local level."

But in many school cafeterias around the state, including Los Angeles Unified, Yuba City Unified, and 14 districts in Santa Barbara County, what the federal government does has less relevance because of local initiatives already underway. In those districts, salad bars, cooking from scratch, and eating local, organic produce are already on the menu.

In August, in a major new initiative, LAUSD chef Mark Baida implemented a new lunch menu providing more nutritious meals. In Yuba City, New York-trained chef David Heggard has created food courts on the high school campus that offer meals cooked from scratch, such as barbecues each day and stir-fry in the Chinese restaurant.

One of the most notable examples of schools serving up healthier meals -- and making them profitable at the same time -- is in Santa Barbara County. Fourteen school districts are participating in [s'Cool Food](#), a 10-year initiative supported by the Orfalea Foundation, a Santa Barbara-focused philanthropy started by Paul Orfalea, the founder of Kinko's.

Project director Kathleen de Chadenèdes and her staff determined that the main obstacles to schools offering healthy food were a lack of cooking equipment and untrained cafeteria staff. So s'Cool Food set up "cooking camps," run by chefs, to show cafeteria staff how to cook from scratch. And then the project provided these staff with the equipment they needed to put into practice what they had learned.

With these initial costs footed by the Orfalea Foundation, districts have been able to operate in the black. Nancy Weiss is a chef and director of the Department of Nutrition for Santa Barbara School Districts, which includes Santa Barbara Elementary School District and Santa Barbara Secondary School District. A little more than half of the elementary school children receive free or reduced-price meals, and about 30 percent of the secondary students do.

Weiss says she was able to turn a "heat and serve" school meals program that was losing money into a homemade food enterprise with a budget surplus. The main ways she has saved money are by eliminating middlemen in purchasing food and by focusing staff time on cooking. These strategies include:

- Buying pre-cut meat and poultry directly from the U.S. Agriculture Department's co-op in Petaluma instead of buying the same USDA meat from a distributor after it has been processed by a food company. For example, she uses pre-cut poultry to make barbecued chicken instead of buying frozen chicken nuggets. When she took over, the district was spending about 400,000 on processed food. This year, the price is down to about 10,000, she said.
- Buying organic produce from local farmers. Before Weiss took over, the district was buying a case of 24 lettuce heads that were not organic at a cost of about 22 or higher, depending on the weather and the scarcity of the product. She now gets a case of just-picked organic lettuce for a guaranteed price of 11. "We can lock in the price because the farmers know that all our dollars are focused on them."
- Serving what is in season. Weiss says she and her staff explain to kids that they better enjoy their plums now because it will be a year before they return. This is one of the many ways, she says, that lunch can be used to educate children.
- Buying directly from manufacturers. Many of the students in her district are Latinos, so tortillas are important. She buys them directly from a manufacturer in Oxnard. A pack of 60 tortillas costs 1.07 compared with 2.25 through a grocery distributor.
- Saving staff time and reducing waste by eliminating wrapped, individualized portions. Students can put food directly on their trays, which have sections for milk, utensils, and food. In the past, food service staff would, for example, put fruit cocktail in cups, put the lid on the cups, and then hand the cups to the kids. Now kids simply choose the fresh fruit they want from the salad bar.
- Another district in Santa Barbara County, Goleta Union, is saving money and reducing waste by eliminating most of the Styrofoam dishes, all straws (kids just drink from the milk cartons), plastic utensils (kids use metal ones that are then collected and washed), and all individually wrapped condiments. Instead, schools provide condiment stations or squeeze bottles at the end of the serving line.

Another way to raise revenue for the program is to appeal to adults, says Goleta Union's Food Service Director Sharon Baird. The breakfast menu is so appetizing, she says, that parents who drop their kids off at school often stay—and pay. Breakfast includes entrées such as homemade hot oatmeal, granola, homemade whole-grain muffins, fruit smoothies, and a yogurt parfait with toppings customers can choose, such as diced fruit or granola. Each day, she also offers a special item, such as French toast, waffles, or a breakfast sandwich or burrito.

And by adding salad bars at every school in the elementary district, Baird has attracted teachers and other staff as paying customers. The salad bar approach also encourages children to try new foods, she says, because they have the freedom to choose.

Although the Santa Barbara districts have the huge advantage of receiving philanthropic support, other districts can find cost-savings ways to move toward healthier eating, nutrition advocates say. All districts can take advantage of their purchasing power to obtain healthier food at lower costs, they say, and think creatively about how best to use staff time and resources.

"Districts, large and small, have found opportunities not only to feed kids healthier and better tasting food, but also to connect students and their community to a more local, visible and accessible food system," author Kalafa said. "Why wait for Congress to dictate? The more model programs we can create, the more we can demonstrate that this could be the norm for all."

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