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Schools and Parents Adapt to Improve Childhood Obesity Rates

Kids develop eating habits in early childhood that affect them well into adulthood.

And considering most young children have very little control over the food they eat, the onus falls squarely on parents and schools to instill healthy habits in children.

But for the last 30 years, both have failed miserably. In that time, childhood obesity has tripled in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines child obesity as a Body Mass Index score in the ninety-fifth percentile for children of the same age and sex. Nearly one in five children under the age of 19 are considered obese.

These rates are more striking when the effects of obesity are considered: It is directly linked to increasing the risk of heart and cardiovascular disease, diabetes and even behavioral issues such as sleep apnea and low self-esteem, according to the CDC.

Most agree that poor diets are a central cause of the high rates, which means schools have a considerable responsibility to serve nutritional meals.

“Every day we serve sub sandwiches, pizza and hamburgers,” said Belva Ellison, a food service employee at Roosevelt Middle School.

Such a menu has been the norm for many years in public schools, and it would likely make a nutritionist shudder. But for the first time in 15 years, major changes are being made to these meals in an attempt to make them healthier. The rule changes stem from

the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act championed by First Lady Michelle Obama and signed by President Obama in 2010.

Starting this year, the new guidelines will be implemented at schools across the country. As members of the federal Child Nutrition Program, all schools in the 4J school district will follow the new rules. The process will take two to three years to complete, but it should enhance the nutritional value of school lunches beginning this year.

“One of the aspects of the new meal pattern rule is in order for children to have a (reduced-price) meal, they have to have at least half a cup of fruit or vegetables,” said Sara Olson, a program analyst in the Child Nutrition Division of the USDA based in Virginia. “(Students) have never been required to take a fruit or veggie before.”

Reduced-price meals are meals that children receive if they are in low-income families. Depending on a child’s family income, lunches are either free or reduced to 40 cents, and breakfasts are free. The USDA reimburses schools for these meals.

Requiring students to take one cup of fruit or vegetables hasn’t yet begun at Roosevelt Middle School, but the school has started making other changes to comply with the new guidelines.

“This year, all students have to take three of the five components that we offer, which includes veggies, fruit, grain, dairy and meat alternative such as beans or a veggie burger,” said Ellison about the effort to ensure students are getting balanced meals.

Another healthy change at Roosevelt resulted in student complaints, according to Tilly Jackson, a food service employee at the school.

“We just went to whole grain for the crust of pizza,” she said. “Eventually everything will be whole grains or wheat based.”

While Roosevelt is beginning to make these changes, not all students will benefit. That’s because it’s the only middle school in Eugene that has an open campus – students can leave the grounds during lunchtime and walk to nearby restaurants, which include Burrito Amigos and Taste of India. The open campus arrangement is allowed because the cafeteria is too small to feed the student body of over 500 students.

In response, the school is taking part in the “Green Cafeteria” program to counter its small facilities. The program aims to reduce waste and increase sustainability at schools in Eugene. As part of the program, Roosevelt has planted a garden that will one day provide vegetables for school lunches.

Roosevelt composts its organic waste, which is then returned to the garden to fertilize the growing plants such as mustard greens and lettuce.

“I think all the schools will go this way,” said Jackson. “What we’re trying to do is eventually get all the veggies ourselves.”

But before then, the school will improve their meals with the Healthy Kids Act, which didn’t confine its new rules to the cafeteria. Under the act, the USDA now has the authority to regulate foods that are sold outside of the cafeteria. This includes food sold in vending machines, school stores and even a la carte items from the lunchroom. The guidelines are still in the proposal stage, but they will eventually offer another way for the USDA to promote healthier eating habits in schools.

As incentive for schools to follow the new mandates, the USDA offers a six-cent per meal increase in federal funding for school lunches. According to Olson, schools must be certified in order to receive the money.

“They have to apply and prove they’re making all the changes we require,” she said.

Even with the six-cent per meal reimbursement for schools, many worried that the Healthy Kids Act would be too expensive to follow, especially considering schools in the 4J district have only \$1 to spend on each school meal, according to Jody Baruth, an operations support manager for Sodexo. Sodexo is a multinational company that manages food service programs for hospitals, colleges, military bases and schools, including all elementary, middle and high schools in the 4J district.

“For all schools we’re given back a federal reimbursement,” said Baruth, who lives in Oregon. “Our budget is a dollar per meal whether the school district operates in-house or hires a food service management company (like Sodexo).”

Sodexo is reimbursed \$2.88 per meal from the USDA, but nearly two-thirds of that goes to the cost of labor, cleaning, maintenance and benefits for employees. The remaining \$1 is used for purchasing the food itself.

An already tight budget for food in the nation’s schools (such as the one for the 4J district) made the expensive Healthy Kids Act a controversial one when first proposed in 2010. The USDA received 130,000 comments from the public, most of them filled with concerns over how the changes would be funded. The additional costs of the new guidelines were estimated to be nearly \$7 billion over five years for the nation’s schools.

(Specific figures for the 4J school district are unavailable at this time because the new rules are being implemented this year.)

The Department of Agriculture responded with provisions to the rule changes that make them more affordable. For example, schools will have until the 2013-2014 school year to implement the new breakfast requirements. The rule changes for breakfasts, which include serving one cup of fruit or vegetable and that all grains are whole grain rich, will be more costly than those for lunches.

Delaying the implementation of the new breakfasts saved schools a substantial amount of money. However, the existing changes were still estimated to cost \$3 billion.

To make up for the difference, schools will raise prices as directed by the USDA. Schools will gradually raise the prices for paid lunches until they equal the federal reimbursement for free lunches, given to the children from low-income families.

According to a meeting held by the Board of Directors of the 4J School District in 2011, increasing the price of lunch in high schools by 15 cents was estimated to raise revenue by \$6,000 per year for the district.

Price increases will also be applied to non-program foods, such as from school stores, vending machines and a la carte items. The USDA advises raising prices of a la carte items so they match what the school paid for them. Schools have a tendency to charge less than what they paid for these items to draw kids to the lunch line, according to Olson. The USDA then pays for this deficit that the school creates.

“That money should go to kids getting the (free) lunch, so we want all that extra food to be sold at full price,” she said.

While these provisions will ease the transition for schools to provide healthier meals, Baruth said she could make even more improvements if she had a bigger budget. She said one of the first changes she would make would be to increase the number of meal choices.

“(More money) would increase our options of what we have to offer,” she said. “I would pick a variety of produce and vegetables, and our options would be greater for entrees.”

According to Baruth, more money is spent on prison food per meal than in schools. While this is partially the result of adults requiring more calories, the gap is extreme.

In 2010, the Department of Corrections reported that the average daily meal per inmate cost \$2.37, after subtracting the cost of food service labor. This figure is more than twice as much as that spent on students, whose meals cost only \$1.

Still, Baruth is optimistic that with the healthier guidelines, school food is improving.

“I have a great product for a dollar,” Baruth said. “We do the best we can for what we have.”

As schools improve their meals and children’s health in the process, parents can do the same with a surprisingly simple (and inexpensive) adjustment at meal times.

The beverage that children drink with meals can have a strong influence on their eating habits, and water is one that actually encourages healthier habits.

That’s what a University of Oregon professor found after studying the effect of beverage choice in food consumption. T. Bettina Cornwell is intrigued by children’s possible associations of sugary drinks with unhealthy foods. She co-authored a study

that tested consumption of vegetables when accompanied with different beverages. The findings may offer some useful tools in fighting childhood obesity.

“Parents tend to be confused about what is the best thing to do for their child in terms of diet,” said Cornwell.

According to Cornwell, food and beverage combination preferences can take shape during early childhood.

Michael Wartella, 10, said he drinks milk every day with his school lunch. His father, Richard, said he rarely gives his son soda, instead he chooses juice or milk for him.

Michael, however, doesn't always follow his father's suggestions. If he could decide his own lunch, he'd have lasagna and soda.

Cornwell said the problem with sweetened beverages – such as soda, sport drinks and Kool-Aid – does not stem solely from their lack of nutritional value or high sugar content, as some may think.

“The child's experience with the drink leads them to want or expect other kinds of food,” she said.

In other words, Cornwell proposes that an unhealthy drink could encourage children to want an unhealthy meal and discourage them from a healthy one, such as a plate of vegetables.

Katie Baker, a mother of two, said she allows her daughters soda on certain occasions. During family movie nights, Baker lets her daughters drink it with popcorn.

“I don't let them drink too much of it,” she said. “They usually both have one can of it on those days.”

Baker's youngest daughter, eight-year-old Paige, said her favorite lunch is a grilled cheese sandwich. She typically has a Capri Sun during lunch, but for her ideal lunch, she chose something else.

"I'd have some kind of clear soda if I was allowed to," she said, "probably Sierra Mist."

Cornwell surveyed college students first, wanting to find a beverage that went well with healthier foods. She found that they enjoyed water coupled with all the foods she tested.

"Pizza, fries, pasta – you can have it with anything," Cornwell said, "but it particularly went well with vegetables."

To test her theory that drinking water encourages healthy eating, Cornwell gave children a plate of vegetables and observed how much they ate when given different beverages.

"We asked ourselves, if we served water, does it help in terms of what else is on the table?" she said.

She found that children actually ate more vegetables when drinking water.

Cornwell and her co-author Anna McAlister reported their findings in the study, *Contingent Choice: Exploring the Relationship Between Sweetened Beverages and Vegetable Consumption*. The results suggest that sweetened beverages may "prime a child's palate to be less accepting of raw vegetables ... after consuming only a small amount of the sweetened drink, children were relatively disinterested in eating vegetables."

On some level, children are aware of the error they may be making by choosing soda, yet that doesn't necessarily stop them.

Nere Savage said she only gives her daughter soda when they have guests over. Seven-year-old Nathalie was reluctant to admit her fondness for the drink. Instead she said she would choose juice if she had a choice.

"You can tell the truth, Nathalie," Savage said. "You'd choose pop."

This is not a surprising choice to Cornwell.

"It's easier when a young child starts out without soda than to take it away from a child that is accustomed to it," said Cornwell, "but the value is there if you're able to reduce soda consumption."

If eating healthier is as simple as drinking water with meals, Cornwell believes her findings can have a positive effect on fighting childhood obesity.

Beverage choice isn't the only solution to obesity, but it may play a significant role in encouraging children to make better eating choices at home, at school and for years to come.