

Reading, writing and raisins: how school food innovations are reducing childhood obesity

By Christina Hernandez Sherwood | January 29, 2013, 5:58 AM PST

Special Feature: The **Food** Issue



On a chilly November morning, the auditorium at the Philadelphia School District office was sweltering. In what looked like a flash mob dance rehearsal, dozens of city school students wearing blue T-shirts with the slogan “Believe the Hype” bounced and swayed to the song Gangnam Style. Forming a sweaty, smiling Conga line, they weaved around the room as local health educator and rap artist Sterlen Barr shouted, “That’s what it means to be hype!”

Despite the mid-morning dance party, much of this youth summit meant to encourage students to promote healthy changes at their schools was focused on food. Before busting their moves, the students from 40 city schools enjoyed a breakfast of Greek yogurt and listened as administration officials gave shout-outs to school-based food successes, such as a salad sale at a North Philadelphia elementary school. There's much to celebrate here. Over the past several years, Philadelphia has revamped its school food offerings with striking success.

Over a lunch of wraps and baked chips, the students split into small groups to brainstorm with classmates about how to keep the momentum going. A handful of Southwest Center City middle schoolers dreamed up innovative ways to bring healthy change to their school — where many students eat at least two meals a day. While eighth-grader Terell Greenagh resolved, “lunch is going to be hard to change,” his classmates hoped the school would serve snacks of baby carrots or grapes rather than pretzels. Terell's seventh-grade sister Terria lamented that recess ended at sixth grade. “We used to go outside and play double-dutch every day,” she said. “Instead of just sitting there for lunch, they should let us do something.”

Conversations like these are happening in school district offices, classrooms and businesses around the globe as much of the world struggles with an obesity epidemic. In the United States, the steady uptick in childhood obesity means today's children could live shorter lifespans than their parents. Health problems that were once adult conditions — namely diabetes and cardiovascular diseases — now strike children, said Dr. James Marks, senior vice president and director of the Health Group at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “Since the late 1970s, the rates of obesity have gone up in children three- to four-fold,” he said. “It increases the likelihood of so many serious illnesses.”

To stem the tide, national and regional healthy food initiatives are targeting schools. “Why are we going to schools?” Marks said. “Because that's where the kids are.” Children consume as many as half their meals in schools, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with more than 5 billion school lunches served in 2011. With children spending so much time — and so many calories — in school, it's the ideal place to promote nutrition, Marks said. “If [school] is a healthy place,” he said, “they get used to that.”

A recent study showed the efforts are paying off. In a September report, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found the national childhood obesity rate has remained steady in recent years and some cities and states, including Philadelphia and California, have seen drops. “We've had about 30 years of steady increases,” Marks said. “Now we're seeing a leveling off and, in a few cases, a decline.” The Institute of Medicine reported that if other communities followed the lead of the most successful cities and states, children's health would continue to improve. “If we act,” Marks said, “we could be confident of a decline.”

Philadelphia, which saw a 4.7 percent decline in its childhood obesity rate from the 2006-07 school year to the 2009-10 school year, stands out. It was the first city to show greater reductions in high-risk groups. The obesity rate for African American boys declined by 7.6 percent, the study showed, while the rate for Hispanic girls decreased by 7.4 percent. “If we as a nation had shown greater progress in the well-to-do kids,” Marks said, “we actually would have been exacerbating disparities.”

On a national scale, school food was revamped in 2010 with the passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, which came into effect this academic year. New lunch standards included reducing fat and sodium content, increasing whole grain foods and doubling fruit and vegetables. Though the USDA is offering a 6-cent reimbursement rate increase for the new meals, individual cities and states have found creative ways to

adhere to the standards in their schools. And many — including Philadelphia — added innovations of their own.

Even as an economically disadvantaged city — with 26 percent of the population below the federal poverty level in 2011, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, Philadelphia is the poorest big city in the United States — the school food movement there made strides. The district banned soda machines, restricted portion sizes and sodium in snacks, introduced a lunch menu with more whole grains, educated parents about healthy eating and established school wellness councils. Marks remembered visiting a Philadelphia elementary school where students experimented with tasting new fruits and vegetables. He met a third-grade girl who had her first banana at school — and it became her new favorite fruit.

At Francis E. Willard, a K-4 school in North Philadelphia, initiatives include color-based tastings, where red foods like strawberries and cabbage grace the menu, and fundraisers promoting fruit salad and smoothies instead of candy and brownies. At a fall wellness event there, Elaine Rosario, the parent of a fourth-grade girl, said she's glad the school instills healthy habits. Because Rosario's children watch her deal with diabetes, including regular finger pricks for blood-sugar testing, they're motivated to be healthy. "They tell me, 'Mom, I don't want to poke myself,'" she said.

When the new national standards were released, some Iowa schools shied away from offering lunchtime salad bars because of difficulties monitoring food distribution for government reimbursement, said Carrie Scheidel, co-director of the nutrition team at the Iowa Department of Education. "We heard schools saying they were just putting their salad bars into storage," she said. But some now offer a fruit and vegetable bar instead. For a school lunch to be government reimbursable, Scheidel said, a fruit or vegetable must accompany the entree. With a fruit and vegetable bar, students decide whether they're in the mood for orange wedges or bite-sized broccoli. "You're not putting something in their plate that they're not going to eat," Scheidel said.

Businesses join the fight

Behind the scenes, businesses are playing a growing role in the healthy school food movement, especially since the new standards, said Lawrence Soler, president and chief executive of the Partnership for a Healthier America, a non-profit working with the private sector in the childhood obesity fight. The cookware giant All-Clad agreed to donate \$2 million worth of cooking equipment to schools partnering with chefs to improve nutritional education, he said. "There's been a marked increase in the amount of interest we've had from vendors and private sector companies," Soler said. "They're going to play a critical role in ensuring that options offered in school food are healthy and appreciated by kids."

When Kristin Richmond and Kirsten Tobey of Revolution Foods set out to build a company offering delicious and nutritious school meals, they were cheered on by teachers and principals. The educators lamented that some students' only school-day fuel was Cheetos and a Slurpee — evidenced by red teeth and blue tongues. "If we're not setting kids up for success with what they're eating in school," Tobey said, "we're not going to set them up for success academically."

Revolution Foods ignored critics who said kids would never give up junk food. Since its 2005 launch, the company has served more than 50 million meals, many in low-income communities, Tobey said. Its partners include Stonyfield Farms, the organic yogurt company, she said, and one of its most popular items is a five-ingredient hotdog made with grass-fed beef. "Food has to taste good in order for kids to want to eat it," she

said. And while Tobey admitted that healthy food tends to cost more than highly-processed, preservative-packed food, she said Revolution Foods offers meals that can be reimbursed by the federal government.

Farmers have been another private sector partner in the movement to make school food healthier. The USDA's Farm to School program, which helps bring local or regional food to school cafeterias, is complementary to the new nutrition standards, said Colleen Matts, farm to institution specialist at the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. "If we can introduce new and different healthy foods to kids," she said, "those are things that can last with them through their lifetime." Before connecting them with farmers, Matts helps schools determine which farm-fresh foods to incorporate into their menus. Schools that already serve apples might start there. "Can they substitute in a local apple?" Matts said.

While partnerships with schools aren't huge moneymakers for farmers, Matts said, they can provide high-volume and guaranteed sales. "Some farmers have been doing less marketing at farmers markets in favor of institutional sales," she said. Other farmers appreciate the personal connection they get from working with schools, Matts said, such as interacting with students through cafeteria chats and after-school programs. "The students will see them and say, 'Hey, there's Farmer Mike with his apples,'" she said.

Even as childhood obesity rates decline, challenges to lasting change remain. Cafeteria staff accustomed to heat-and-serve meal preparation need training to handle fresh food, Matts said, and some schools don't have the space and equipment to store and prepare it. And while the USDA works to make local food accessible to all schools through its system, Matts predicted success was a long way off. Vendors need to be USDA certified to participate, she said, and not a single Michigan farmer has signed up for the expensive certification process. "They're talking about doing the school food system differently," Matts said. "It's been institutionalized for so many years."

Obstacles outside school walls might pose the biggest threat to the school food movement. Terria Greenough's Philadelphia community is packed with corner stores, but the nearest supermarket is a mile away. After school, neighborhood kids frequent a pizza shop where slices sell for \$1.50. Scheidel of Iowa said the childhood obesity fight needs to move into homes and communities. "When I grew up I didn't really like school lunch, but I loved my mom's well-balanced meals," she said. "It's almost like we switched roles over the years." Now, Scheidel said, parents say their children don't like the new healthy options. "If they're not eating fresh foods and whole grains at home," she said, "they're not going to like school lunch."

Still, school food officials believe we're headed in the right direction. Another four years with the Obama administration — and a first lady who has prioritized children's health — will help institutionalize positive changes, Matts said. And it'll give schools time to catch up to the new standards by finding available fresh food and learning to handle the products. "I don't think all schools were ready," she said. "Schools are adjusting and students are adjusting."

Marks, of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said the encouraging signs should be greeted with cautious optimism. "We have to think of these as green shoots," he said. "They're early, they're fragile, they're encouraging, but our culture isn't there yet." We need to go much farther, Marks said. "It's not just what a local school can do, but what our national companies and organizations can do as well," he said. "There's still much more to be done."

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