

New R.I. mandates aim to make school lunches more healthful

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It's been a while since French fries have dared to make a public appearance in a Rhode Island school cafeteria. And the same holds true for fried fish sticks, potato puffs, ice cream cups, brownies and other fatty, sugary foods.

This year, the list of extinct school lunch foods will get a lot longer due to more stringent nutrition requirements instituted by the state Department of Education.

"I'm thrilled with these," Education Commissioner Deborah A. Gist says of the requirements approved by the Board of Regents in February. "It's going to be a work in progress and there will be an adjustment period, but what won't change is our commitment to better nutrition for our students. Also to think that Rhode Island is leading the country in this area is exciting."

The responsibility for making the new menu mandates work will rest with the private food service companies that contract with school districts throughout the state. Their representatives say that they need to be resourceful in seeking out affordable sources of whole-grain snacks and other specialty foods and they also need to make sure they don't lose student customers who may be initially daunted by the parade of vegetables that will dominate cafeteria serving lines.

If those pieces fall into place, the new nutritious lunch will not cost school districts more money.

Food service professionals say that the new regulations may be more difficult for the few remaining districts that run their own lunch programs — including Cranston, North Smithfield, North Kingstown and Block Island — since they don't have the bulk purchasing power of the private companies. Also, state nutrition experts say that teenagers will probably be the hardest to win over since they have a taste for fast food restaurant fare.

"Our school lunch sales have already been negatively impacted by the changes in school nutrition made even before these new requirements," Cranston School Supt. Peter Nero says. "We just don't know the long term, and we're hoping over time that the kids will buy into this."

"You can't argue with nutritious foods — our kids spend a large portion of their day with us and we want them to be healthy."

The new requirements boost the number of servings of fruits or vegetables that must be offered at every school lunch and breakfast with the added caveat that legumes (dried beans, dried peas or lentils) be in the mix at least once a week.

White breads and flour are a thing of the past, with whole grains required whether it's a hamburger bun or pizza dough. Milk must have no more than 1-percent fat and flavored options will be allowed only at lunch, not at breakfast.

Fruit drinks must consist of 100-percent juice.

The new regulations also restrict sodium and sugars, and ban artificial sweeteners.

“What parents are going to see is a lot more fruits and vegetables on their children's trays,” says Dorothy Brayley, executive director of Kids First, the nonprofit nutrition and wellness organization that was the key architect of the new regulations. Noting that there is also a push for school districts or their food-service companies to buy local, Brayley says that whenever possible the peaches, apples, corn and other produce served in cafeterias will come from Rhode Island farms.

Brayley, who serves on national nutrition committees, says the new requirements will make Rhode Island school cafeterias among the healthiest in the nation since she does not know of any other state that has implemented such stringent requirements.

Meeting the requirements will take work, but Brayley says the adjustment may be easier than some districts anticipate.

For one thing, Rhode Island has been slowly but steadily moving toward better nutrition in its schools — banishing soda machines and vanquishing unhealthy snacks from cafeteria à la carte lines.

And even though the new requirements officially went into effect with the start of this school year, Brayley says that more than a dozen of the state's 36 school districts had already implemented them. Aramark worked with the state to launch the new lunches last year in all its districts, and several other school systems joined the pilot program effort on a voluntary basis.

According to Brayley and data sheets provided by Kids First, it is imperative that American youth develop healthy eating habits or they face some grim statistics.

Quoting data collected by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 16 percent of all children in the country are overweight or obese — triple the number two decades ago. Also, obesity is cited as one of the main factors in the rapid rise of Type 2 diabetes in America.

IT WAS TASTE, not data, that was on the minds of Jenks Junior High School students in Pawtucket Thursday as they perused their options before augmenting their whole-grain encrusted chicken patties, burgers and veggie-topped pizza slices with salads, sliced cucumbers and carrot sticks. There were fat-free dipping sauces for the vegetables and a choice of fresh fruits for dessert.

“I like these lunches,” said seventh-grader Maria Hernandez as she nodded with approval while lifting the top of her whole-grain sandwich bun. “I like to eat healthy snacks at home.”

The response was equally positive on Wednesday, when Linda Succi, principal of Whiteknact Elementary School in East Providence, arranged to have some of the new lunches on display for parents as they escorted their children on the first day of school.

After looking at the trays loaded with fruits and vegetables, Candy DePina said she had changed her mind about making her daughter’s lunch every day. “I was leery about how nutritious the school lunch would be, but now that I see what it’s going to be, I want that,” she said.

Despite a lot of positive response, Brayley and the various private food service companies that serve public schools are frank about the fact that the new requirements will require more work and creativity in order to keep lunch participation numbers from dropping and causing food service programs to run in the red.

Besides the fact that a cinnamon-flavored whole grain snack cracker might cost more than a less-nutritious counterpart, food services companies say that another challenge will be coming up with recipes and display that make the new meals tantalizing to students.

There are no penalties attached to the new nutrition requirements but the Department of Education expects them to be followed just like any other requirement, academic or otherwise.

Commissioner Gist points out that the state is not just imposing the regulations and walking away from the districts. Instead it is going to work with the schools and their food service companies throughout the year to help them adapt to the changes. Fortunately, she said, a federal grant will make it possible for the state to rely on Kids First to make its chefs and other resources available to the schools.

“A lot of us are ready for this because it didn’t just happen overnight,” says Solange Morrissette, a Sodexo general manager who oversees the company’s school contracts in Pawtucket, Jamestown and Newport. “Also nutrition is the discussion in this industry nationwide.”

Meeting the new sodium limit will probably be the greatest challenge, according to Morrissette who has created a student “board of directors” to taste and rate new recipes.

There is also the matter of making sure the healthy foods are attractively displayed, says Morrissette who delights in being particular about the colorful tablecloths and signs that adorn the food lines in her districts.

Competitor Aramark has come up with “Cool*Caf,” an easy-access fresh fruit and vegetable bar, as well as express line where kids can grab hot or cold “sack lunches” so they have more time to eat.

“You’ll hear a lot of us in the industry say “we eat with our eyes” and it’s true,” Morrissette says. “We have to make this food look good to the kids. We want them to want these fresh foods.”

“We know this is the right thing to do.” School lunch nutrition requirements

Minimum of 3 servings of fruits and/or vegetables offered with every lunch.

Minimum of 3 different fruits offered per week.

Minimum of 5 different non-fried vegetables offered per week.

At least one fruit or vegetable each day must be dark green or orange.

At least one fruit or vegetable each day must be fresh or raw.

One or more servings of cooked legumes must be offered each week.

Fruit juices must be 100-percent juice.

Milk must be 1-percent fat or skim milk.

Cereals, breads, pasta and other grain items must be whole grain, which by USDA definition means at least 51 percent whole grain flour.

Rice must be brown rice.

The weekly average sodium for lunches cannot exceed 1070 milligrams.

Artificial sweeteners are not allowed.

Source: Kids First