

# School lunch in a pickle

## Healthy options on the rise but many kids still resist them

By Debra Melani , Special to the Rocky

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Remember school lunch? The sticky macaroni and cheese, the soggy pizza squares?

And if you couldn't stomach the main entree, your cafeteria lady would offer you a low-fat yogurt or a fresh turkey wrap on a whole-wheat tortilla?

Wait, that last part doesn't ring a bell?

Fast-forward a few decades. If you visit a school today, you are likely to find those kinds of options; *fresh*, *low-fat* and *choices* have become buzzwords in the food-service field.

An increasing number of districts in Colorado are adopting "healthy" vending-machine policies, booting fryers from their kitchens and giving their students more options.

But when it comes to solving the nation's obesity crisis and improving children's nutrition, there's still a long way to go, experts agree. That feat requires a societal shift and nutrition education, especially for the kids, they say.

"It doesn't make any difference how nutritious and healthy it is if they won't take it," said Leo Lesh, executive director of Food and Nutrition Services for Denver Public Schools.

As students milled past him during lunch hour at Kunsmiller Middle School, it was clear that cheeseburger and fries seemed to be the most popular option, not salad or turkey-wraps.

Dayle Hayes, a registered dietitian from Montana who spoke to Colorado educators last month on the issue, said it's everyone's duty to change the message children receive about food and nutrition.

"It's not just important to talk about what to take out, it's really critical to talk about what to put in," Hayes said, using a recent fat-lowering shift from regular chips to baked chips in the nation's schools as an example.



Beth Jauquet, a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the Colorado Dietetic Association.

"That's an improvement, but it's still a chip," she said.

With many students eating two of their three daily meals at school (breakfast is free to all DPS students), it might seem that educators have considerable power to solve the problem.

But it's not that easy, Lesh said.

For instance, why not just eliminate the less-desirable options in school? Because many kids would skip lunch, Lesh said.

A cheeseburger and fries outperforms an empty stomach, especially because DPS uses 85 percent to 90 percent lean beef, low-fat cheese and a whole-wheat bun, he said.

Or why not mandate healthy choices? DPS does require those students who buy the regular school lunch to take a fruit or vegetable side with the entree. If they don't, the cashier sends them back to get one.

"But we can't force them to eat it," Lesh said. "That's the fallacy of the whole program."

Food service workers can't be police, either, Lesh said, noting that a middle-schooler could choose a bag of chips for a quick lunch so he can save his lunch money for a CD, or an elementary student could dump an uneaten food tray so she has time to go play.

"What would you rather do: Eat a kiwi or go play kickball?" asked Bob Gorman, area supervisor at Richard T. Castro Elementary, as he watched students toss food, including kiwi fruit, into the trash cans and rush to the playground.

Budgets also restrict food-service directors' ability to boost nutrition, as healthier often means costlier in the food-purchasing business. For every additional penny Lesh spends on a student lunch, his annual costs increase \$80,000.

It's not an easy issue, but it's one worth fighting for, said Hayes, who travels the country doing so.

"We need to be giving consistent messages to kids. And we need to give food the attention it deserves. Food is fundamental to life and to our kids' school success."

### **From the dietitian**

We recently visited three DPS schools - Castro, Kunsmiller and Abraham Lincoln High School - with **Beth Jauquet**, a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the Colorado Dietetic Association. She pointed out the best and worst lunch choices:

\* **Top choices:** Turkey wrap, fajita salad, pizza

\* **Worst choices:** French fries, burgers, chicken fingers

\* **Top vending machine choices:** Baked Cheetos, Baked Ruffles, Snyder's pretzels, Nature Valley Granola Bar (honey wheat), Clif Bar

\* **Worst vending machine choices:** Doughnuts, pastry, Funyuns, cookies, Pop-Tarts

### **Nutrition wish list**

#### **Beth Jauquet offers the following fixes to school lunches. If she could, she would:**

- \* Not count french fries as a vegetable (DPS does).
- \* Serve salad, not fries, as a side with burger.
- \* Add nutrient-dense a la carte options, such as yogurt, granola bars and low-fat string cheese, next to such poor-nutrient options as Ramen noodle soups and Pop-Tarts.
- \* Make peanut butter sandwiches with whole wheat bread rather than buy prepackaged "Uncrustables."
- \* Offer 100 percent whole grain options instead of just 51 percent (still better than white).
- \* Ban vending machines from cafeterias.
- \* Replace iceberg with romaine (darker-leafed) lettuce for more nutrients.
- \* Offer nutrition classes.

#### **But it's not all bad news, Jauquet says. On the bright side in DPS schools:**

- \* All cheese is low fat.
- \* Pizza (contracted through Blackjack Pizza) is made with low-fat cheese, low-fat pepperoni and whole wheat crust.
- \* Many schools in the district make bread from scratch, with 51 percent whole wheat flour.
- \* All milk is 1 percent or skim, and the flavored milk must be skim to counterbalance extra calories.
- \* Fresh fruit and vegetables are offered every day.
- \* Students periodically have a "yogurt-basket" option, which includes low-sugar yogurt, muffin, low-fat cheese stick and milk.
- \* Soda machines are shut down during meals and a half hour before and after.

\* There are no fryers in DPS kitchens anymore (but frozen, pre-packaged products can be flash-fried).

### **Then and now**

During the past decade in Denver public schools, deep fat fryers in kitchens were nixed and lunch options for students bumped up. An example of the menu changes over the years:

\* **Feb. 14, 1995:** Sweetheart chicken nuggets, mixed vegetables, corn bread, fruit cocktail, raspberry sherbet.

\* **Feb. 14, 2008:** Meatball sub or chicken fajita, salad or turkey ranch wrap, green beans, fruited gelatin, brownie.

### **Fueling up**

March 3-7 is National School Breakfast Week. Denver Public Schools, recognized nationally for a free breakfast program, will celebrate:

\* **When:** 8:30 a.m., March 5

\* **Where:** Teller Elementary, 12th Avenue and Garfield Street

\* **How:** Superintendent Michael Bennett will award a laptop computer to the student who writes the best essay on how important it is to eat a healthy breakfast.