

Lunch Choices

How do you decide what to eat for lunch?

Are you more likely to eat a salad if you have to stand in line by the salad bar before you can pay for your lunch?

Are you more likely to take plain milk if the chocolate and strawberry-flavored milks are hidden behind it?

Are you more likely to take an apple if it's in a pretty basket?

These are just a few ideas suggested by researchers to help students make better, healthier choices.

In the last few years, there has been a push toward making public school lunches healthier. Some schools were using a lot of pre-cooked and processed foods. They served foods like frozen pizza and chicken nuggets. These kinds of foods are readily available and tend to be cheap. And students like them. However, they are often high in fat and full of artificial (chemical) flavors, colors and preservatives.

School officials generally agree that these are not the best kinds of foods for kids to eat. Students need fresh fruit and vegetables. They need foods with fiber, vitamins and minerals. Healthy foods provide lasting energy. They give the students the nutrients they need to focus and to do their best in the classroom.

The federal government already has rules about what kinds of food students are given for school lunch. However, requiring that carrot sticks and fruit are provided doesn't mean that students are actually eating it.

"In elementary school, we had to take some vegetables from the salad bar," says Becky Lee, now in 7th grade. "My friends would use the carrot sticks to make towers. I don't think I ever saw anyone actually eat one."

"Last year, we started requiring every student to take a piece of fruit," says principal Susan Ishikawa. "But most of it just ended up in the garbage."

"It doesn't count as nutrition if they never eat it."

So researchers began to look for ways to get students to choose and actually eat the healthier options.



Some schools started by reducing the unhealthy choices.

"We took out the soda machines this past summer," says Tessa Sanchez. Mrs. Sanchez is a teacher at the middle school. "There were a lot of disappointed students when school started up in the fall. I was surprised to realize that there were several students who truly didn't know what to get for lunch. They'd been making it through the day with nothing but the

sugar and caffeine from a can of soda. I think it was a good decision to take the soda machines away.”

Vending machine options were also updated. Granola bars replaced candy bars. Baked chips replaced fried. Dried fruit, nuts, and beef jerky rounded out the choices.

One teacher jokes that these changes were the reason she’s lost five pounds this school year.

In another district, teachers were told that they are no longer allowed to give students candy in class. Several districts are no longer allowing students to bring cupcakes or other treats on their birthdays. “Students can celebrate their birthdays without having junk food,” explains one principal. “Besides, when food is brought from home, it might not be safe for all of the students. Maybe a student in the class has a severe allergy to nuts. If food is brought in from a home where there are nuts, the allergic student could be exposed.”

Restrictions have worked to some degree. Students who buy lunch at school are getting a healthier lunch.

However, many schools have noticed more and more students bringing food from home. This

way they can have whatever kinds of food they want.

So, is it possible to get the students to want to eat the healthier options?

Researchers are continuing to understand why kids make the choices they make. They want to figure out what will make them want to make better food choices.

In the meantime, schools are on their own to figure out what works.

“We did an experiment this year,” says Principal Ishikawa. “At the beginning of the school year, we picked out several well-liked 4th and 5th graders. We had them fill up their plates with lots of fresh foods. They had salad, carrot sticks, and fruit. Then they sat at tables with the younger students. Those littler kids could see the big kids eating healthy foods. After a day or two, the younger students started eating the same foods. Once the older kids went back to making their own choices and eating with their own friends, the amount of fresh fruit and veggies they ate went down. But they were still eating more than they had before.”

“We want our kids to want to be healthy.”