lunchtime: changing one school at a time

by abby luby

PICTURE THIS: Students in a school lunch line eagerly wait for vegetarian chili over fresh, locally made tortilla chips with a colorful side of fresh fruits and vegetables. A voice from behind the counter chimes, "Grab your fruits and vegetables! Cucumbers are a good choice my friends!"

Not happening in my kid's school, you say?

Actually, this lunch-line scene is from the soon-to-be released documentary, *Two Angry Moms*, a film about the growing movement to get healthful foods on school lunch trays. The scene was shot at the Peterborough Elementary School, part of the ConVal school district in New Hampshire. The food service there is supervised by Chef Tony Geraci, who refers to students as his "clients." The students actually design part of the meal program at the grade school.

"We're the only school district in the nation that has a complete monthly cycle of kid-designed meals," Geraci says in the film. "We don't use regular corn chips with goopy orange stuff that comes from a can. We made this chili from scratch with a vegetarian version and a meat version."

Most parents would be surprised that a vegetarian dish is being served in a public school; many likely would want to

PHOTO BY JERRY NOVESKY

know how to replace the hot dogs, hamburgers, french fries and fried chicken nuggets on their kids' school plates with freshly cooked meals.

Enter Dr. Susan Rubin, of Mount Kisco, and Amy Kalafa, of Georgetown, Connecticut, two moms who are angry and frustrated with school meals and snacks. Rubin and Kalafa were driven to produce *Two Angry Moms*, which looks at how schools across the country are upgrading to more nutrition-based and nutritionally balanced meals. Rubin and Kalafa hope the film will galvanize parents and school administrators nationwide to join wellness committees and organize food coalitions.

The film's title, says Rubin, was inspired by a quote from Texas Agricultural Secretary Susan Coombs. "She said, 'Changing school lunch programs in the schools will take two million angry moms.' So we consider ourselves the first two."

As Rubin and Kalafa connected with parents from coast to coast they heard the same concerns: Too many high-carbohydrate lunch foods, too many sodium-laden snacks and high-fructose drinks in school vending machines. Rubin, a former dentist, became incensed when her kids came home from school with candy wrappers falling out of their backpacks. She left dentistry to pursue a career in nutrition. Now director of a private health-counseling practice in Mount Kisco, she recently formed the Westchester Coalition for Better School Food. "Our group is made up of health professionals, educators and concerned parents," says Rubin, now a diagnostician of food-related diseases. "It's not only obesity, it's allergies, diabetes, cancer and so much more. It's all connected to food—a huge, highly personal and charged issue. When you tell parents they are feeding their kids bad food, some think it's like saying, 'You are a bad parent.'"

High rates of juvenile asthma, allergies, anxiety disorders *and* learning disabilities can all be traced to diet.

Parents, teachers and health officials in Rockland County, inspired by Rubin's model and clips from *Two Angry Moms*, have brought the idea across the river. Educator Rebecca Holt, former oncologist Sheryl Leventhal, and Diane Hoch, a parent and student of integrated nutrition, organized the Rockland Coalition for Better School Food last fall, modeled on Rubin's Westchester group.

Leventhal intensely believes in the food–health connection and, like Rubin, left her medical practice to take up "functional medicine," which utilizes nutrition and lifestyle changes to treat and prevent chronic diseases.

Feast to Famine

Just how did school lunches go from satisfying some dietary requirements to being nutritionally bankrupt? How did pre-packaged, pre-cooked, high-carbohydrate lunches and overly sweet and salty snacks work their way onto our kids' school plates?

"It goes back quite a while—to the program cuts made by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, [when] significant federal funding was taken from [school lunch] programs," according to Mavourneen (Vonnie) Hubbard, Director of Food Services for the North Rockland Central School District. Hubbard has worked in school food services for 30 years.

Historically, school lunch programs had relied on government subsidies that allowed the schools to offer students free or reduced-price lunches. When the government pulled out of the program, schools scrambled to find other sources of revenue to help keep meal prices low—they started selling more snack food and separated à la carte items on their lunch menus. "We never recovered [from] that funding [cut]," Hubbard stresses. "Mandates to keep the program financially solvent without raising lunch prices had us selling snacks at premium prices so we could generate a profit. It just kept going and going."

It wasn't until the late-1990s that people started paying attention to what was going on in school food programs, Hubbard recalls. It took over a decade for federal and state legislation to address the problem. With childhood obesity and diabetes threatening to reach epidemic proportions, Congress passed The Healthy Children Through Better Nutrition Act of 2003, which required institutions to comply with federal nutritional requirements.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that if current obesity trends continue, one-third of all children (including one-half of African-American and Hispanic children) born in 2000 will develop diabetes. Research also has consistently claimed that high rates of juvenile asthma, allergies, anxiety disorders and learning disabilities can all be traced to diet. *—AL*

"I felt I was at the entirely wrong end of the spectrum," Leventhal says of her former career. "I was treating people at the last stages of their disease. Most cancers start 10, 20 or 30 years before someone has symptoms or gets a diagnosis—even when I was successful in treating people with cancer, I was still treating them at the end of the process. I wanted to be at the beginning." Good nutrition and a health program while people are young is the best prevention, Leventhal believes.

The Rockland Coalition for Better School Food already has attracted a diverse group. "We've seen parents, retired teachers, health department folks, school nurses, Orthodox women from Monsey and people from integrated nutrition," Holt says. "We needed to figure out what 'better school food' means. Surprisingly, everyone was on the same page."

Working with schools to change their food programs is a challenge for groups like the Rockland Coalition. Today, most school districts have a suburban School Health Advisory Council, or SHAC, which creates district-wide wellness policies. "We don't want to storm into schools and take over the cafeteria," says Leventhal, parent of two teens in the Suffern School District. "We want to help make the transition easier by giving information to wellness committees in the schools—we want to partner with

What do kids think about the new food agenda?


kelsey smith

Students at the Strawtown Elementary School in the Clarkstown Central School District agreed that the new menu wasn't bad, but they still craved the older-style snacks.

"The Original Sun Chips seem better than the regular Sun Chips we used to have," says fourth-grader **Kelsey Smith**. "They're still crunchy, but not that salty."


mackenzie meyers

Kids gave an *A* to the improved grilled-cheese sandwiches. "They used to be really disgusting, like they were soaked in oil," says fifth-grader **Mackenzie Meyers**. "But today they are using whole wheat bread and they're not so bad."


buddy speigel

Kindergartener **Buddy Speigel** says Mondays are his favorite day because it's 'pasta day.' "I like pasta with cheese and sauce," he says. "Other days I bring my lunch."


matthew majsak

First-grader **Matthew Majsak** especially likes what they serve for the "Breakfast-for-Lunch" meal. "I really like the French toast sticks with syrup," he says.


amanda ferraro

Strawtown fifth graders on their way to the Felix Fester Middle School, the Clarkstown district's largest school, recently sampled that school's more "sophisticated" menu, which, as at the high school, includes cold cuts and a fresh salad bar. "There were fast foods and deli," says Mackenzie, who will attend the middle school next year. "They have this great sparkling juice called 'Izze Juice.' It's real juice, with the fizz."

But the lip-smacking dish the fifth-graders most favored at the middle school was the deli. Third-grader **Amanda Ferraro** says, "It would be great if we had deli here in this school."

—AL

PHOTOS BY ABBY LUBY

schools to help them accomplish the things that need to be done. Hopefully," she adds, "we can become a financial resource as well." (As a nonprofit group, the coalition will build a resource of speakers and seek funds through grants.)

Last year, Rockland County's Clarkstown School District hired food director Robert Preiss, who wants to revamp school lunches and snacks. Preiss met with Hoch and 20 other parents a few months ago to discuss changing the snacks available in the school.

"Rob really wants change to happen, as well," Hoch notes. "He brought snacks offered at the schools—snacks that said *zero fats* or *contains whole grains*. Some thought they were healthy, but they really weren't."

Preiss agrees. "Our district is part of a New York State program that sets criteria for meals and snacks in schools. I wouldn't consider all these [state recommended] snacks to be healthy. They are high in fat and sodium." he says. But, Priess notes, "The state program wants snacks to have 7 grams or less of fat, 2 grams or less of saturated fat, 360 milligrams or less of sodium and 15 grams or less of sugar. Juices must be at least 24 percent or more 'real'—which isn't very good—and the sodium content is very high."

The state criteria are more of a springboard from which Preiss can set basic nutritional standards for the district. "We've started to move forward," Priess notes. "Our beverages in elementary school are 100 percent juice, and we serve only low-fat milk, free of hormones and antibiotics."

Integrating the usual lunch fare with the healthier foods gives the students options—ultimately, though, parents can only hope that the kids choose the carrot over the pretzel or the apple over a cookie. Offering popular pizza and ice cream only twice a week and using whole-wheat bread for rolls and sandwiches are solutions just now hitting the lunch rooms.

One more stumbling block in the transition, however, is that the older kitchens in many elementary schools built in the 1950s are still saddled with a single stove and limited refrigeration and freezer space, which forces the schools to order prepared food that can just be heated and served. Further, most schools order food from SYSCO, one of the largest food distributors in the country, which, like any large distributor, can have nightmarish paperwork requirements. Nonetheless, Preiss and other food directors are pressing SYSCO to supply more healthful foods. "SYSCO is our main distributor—we put out a bid to them every year" Preiss says. "But we're driving them a little crazy because we are asking for snacks that meet certain requirements."

The ingredients parents want eliminated from snacks? Partially hydrogenated fat, high-fructose corn syrup and artificial sweeteners. Changing school food is an incremental process but, Priess notes, the bottom line is cost and breaking even. "We haven't raised prices here in four years," he says, "but lunches might increase five or ten cents." Preiss would like to stop making money off unhealthy foods altogether by offering healthier choices at lunch. "We're making sweet potato fries cooked in canola oil and we're only offering those fries twice a week."

There are a multitude of goals for changing food in schools, some more attainable than others, say members of the Rockland Coalition. Leventhal suggests that, eventually, kids could be picking fruits and vegetables from local farms and bringing them back to eat in school. "This would complete an educational cycle. If children can go and get their hands in the soil, plant seeds and tour a real farm, they will understand more about where their food comes from," she says. "Eventually, they will see and taste the difference between pasture-raised chickens that freely graze and chickens that are corn-fed, pumped with antibiotics and locked in a chicken coop. Whole foods have the biggest effect on the youngest children."

There is always a bottom line, however, and Hubbard says she can't afford to purchase organic meat or chicken for her district, though she says she is keeping her options open. "Nothing is beyond the scope—as long as we have financial support," she stresses. "I have to run an Everyman's kind of program, which means spending about $2 a day per student." ⁘

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