



# FARM TO CAFETERIA

LANCE CHEUNG/USDA

## New USDA regulations lead to healthier, locally produced school lunches

By Karen Asp

**W**ALK INTO ALMOST ANY school these days and you might just be tempted to stay for lunch. That's because in recent years, meals for students have undergone a serious nutritional makeover that's markedly increased their appeal when it comes to appearance as well as flavor.

Since the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 was enacted, schools have been required to serve healthier meals (parts of the law are already in effect; others are still being rolled out). Think more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low- or no-fat dairy.

**CONTINUED »**

**Elementary school students** from Arlington, Va., check out fresh foods brought to them by local farmers. More schools are using locally grown products to make healthier lunches attractive to the children.



A typical school lunch that follows USDA guidelines, such as this one from Mirror Lake Elementary School south of Seattle, includes plenty of fruits and vegetables.

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DALLAS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Students at Margaret B. Henderson Elementary School in Dallas taste-test locally grown beans during a "Harvest of the Month" event that also let them meet actual farmers.

ACCORDING TO THE FARM TO SCHOOL PROGRAM CENSUS OF 2013-2014:



**\$598**  
MILLION

HAS BEEN INVESTED INTO COMMUNITIES



**42,000+**  
SCHOOLS

PARTICIPATE IN THE PROGRAM



**23.5M**  
STUDENTS

ARE ENGAGED IN FARM TO TABLE PROGRAM

It's a revolution of sorts that has also resulted in sourcing locally grown food for the cafeteria and educating children about where their food comes from.

**THE RISE OF LOCAL FOODS**

When the National Restaurant Association surveyed almost 1,600 professional chefs to learn what would be hot on restaurant menus in 2016, one word kept popping up: local. It's a trend that has expanded to schools, where the local food movement is exploding.

Credit the creation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm to School Program for contributing to the fever pitch surrounding local foods. The program encourages schools to buy locally produced foods.

"In addition to making improvements on the nutrition side with the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, Congress decided it was important to pay attention to where the food was coming from," said Deborah J. Kane, national director of the Farm to School Program.

Data indicates that the voluntary program is catching on with schools. The USDA's most recent Farm to School Census — based on data from the 2013-14 school year and

collected in 2015 — found that more than 42,000 schools were participating in the Farm to School Program and that dollars invested in local communities rose to \$598 million, a \$212 million increase from the census conducted two years earlier.

"This tells me the USDA is doing a good job in helping schools go beyond fruits and vegetables to provide local goods," said Kane, adding that foods such as meat, dairy and seafood now fall under the local category.

**OF GROWERS AND GARDENS**

Schools rely on a variety of sources for healthy food items, but when it comes to locally sourced foods, they draw from two main suppliers: growers and school gardens.

Largely inspired by first lady Michelle Obama, an advocate of school gardens as part of her focus on childhood health and nutrition, the cultivated areas on school grounds serve several purposes.

"Along with providing food, school gardens offer educational opportunities," said Carol Chong, a national nutrition adviser for the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, which created a Healthy

**KIDS WITH ACCESS TO VENDING PROGRAMS ATE:**



**26%**  
MORE FRUIT



**14%**  
MORE VEGETABLES



**30%**  
MORE WHOLE GRAINS

Schools Program in 2006 and designed its own set of science-based nutritional guidelines for children. Today, the alliance provides technical assistance to schools to help them meet the government's nutrition regulations and works with manufacturers to produce healthier foods.

At Margaret B. Henderson Elementary School in Dallas, which joined the Healthy Schools Program in 2009, each grade has its own plot in the school garden. As students grow the produce, teachers integrate lessons from the garden into their curricula.

In one class, students taste the garden's bounty for flavor, texture and freshness and compare store-bought vegetables to garden-grown vegetables. The produce then goes home with students or is cooked for students and staff.

"Seeing what they're growing makes kids more likely to eat that food," said Margaret Lopez, executive director of food and child nutrition services for the Dallas Independent School District (ISD).

**WEIGHING THE COSTS**

Healthier foods, however, don't come without controversy, namely their cost. It's often assumed that good-for-you grub costs

more, but that's not always the case.

"In some cases, it can be more expensive, sometimes less expensive," Kane said. The Farm to School Census found that 75 percent of respondents experienced at least one of four benefits — one of which was lower food costs — as a result of buying local.

A 2012 study from the USDA's Economic Research Service, which estimated the cost for more than 4,400 food items, found that when measured for "edible weight" or average portion size, grains, produce and dairy foods were less expensive than most protein foods as well as those high in saturated fat, added sugars and/or sodium.

Yet Lopez's experience has taught her the opposite. "Fresh produce costs more," she said. Plus, there's the added expense of labor to prepare and cook fresh produce.

Of course, cost largely depends on two variables, Kane said — what foods school are trying to buy and what time of year they're trying to buy them. Buying out-of-season might result in higher costs. In-season foods could come with a lower price tag.

Like any business, schools then need to budget for those healthier foods. Some might be able to allocate the subsidies they receive from the USDA for meals served to

students.

Those costs can be further offset through various financial assistance programs. Schools that participate in the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program, run by the USDA, receive monetary reimbursements for every meal and snack they serve. Schools can also apply for grants through the Farm to School Program, which currently gives out up to \$5 million a year. The Senate Agriculture Committee has advanced legislation that would double the annual amount.

**THE PROOF IS IN THE PALATE**

If you've ever tried to get kids to eat more fruits or veggies, you no doubt recall the uphill battle. So what are schools doing to turn young taste buds onto healthier foods? In a nutshell, marketing.

"You have to draw kids into your 'restaurant' and make kids want to eat there," Chong said.

For starters, some schools are going beyond otherwise boring hot entrees and offering items that mirror what kids are eating in restaurants, including wraps and salad platters.

Meanwhile, through the Harvest of the

**HOW THE NEW DIETARY GUIDELINES AFFECT YOUR KIDS**

When it comes to eating healthier, Americans can turn to the government for answers. Dietary guidelines written by experts from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services are updated every five years, and the 2015 to 2020 guidelines were released in January.

So what's new for kids? The following four changes are worth noting:

**1 SODIUM LEVELS DECREASED.**

"Studies show that limiting sodium in kids can prevent hypertension and heart disease later in life," said Jennifer Glockner, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Los Angeles and creator

of the Smartee Plate e-book series.

New sodium recommendations are: No more than 1,500 mg per day for kids aged 1 to 3; no more than 1,900 mg per day for kids 4 to 8; no more than 2,200 mg per day for kids 9 to 13; and no more than 2,300 mg for kids over 14.

**2 TEEN BOYS ARE ADVISED TO CUT BACK ON PROTEIN,** including red meat, poultry and eggs, and eat more veggies.

While kids usually consume enough protein, they fall short on produce, so this is advice that could apply to all kids, Glockner said. Limiting red meat is key. "It's filled with saturated fat, which can lead to cardiovascular disease, and may also be

carcinogenic," she said.

**3 LIMIT ADDED SUGAR TO LESS THAN 10 PERCENT OF DAILY CALORIES.**

The new sugar rule applies to everybody, but especially kids. "Studies show that excess sugar can lead to weight issues, obesity and type 2 diabetes in kids," Glockner said. Note that this doesn't apply to natural sugars in fruits, 100 percent fruit juice and milk.

**4 CUT DOWN ON SATURATED FATS.**

Instead of feeding children animal sources that contain saturated fat, serve them plant-based proteins and oils such as nuts, beans, low-mercury fish, avocado and olive oil, Glockner said.

— Karen Asp

Month program at Dallas ISD schools, one vegetable or fruit is spotlighted monthly, and farmers who have supplied the produce often introduce it in person to the students.

Dallas ISD schools also participate in Farm Fresh Fridays, a statewide incentive that connects schoolchildren to local farmers and ranchers by featuring their foods in meals every Friday.

The upshot? "Kids are more likely to eat foods from producers they've just met than the same foods that are just sitting randomly in a lunch line," Kane said.

How food is presented is also critical. Chong learned from her previous position with Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida that serving cut-up fruits instead of whole fruits made a difference in the amount students consumed. "More students ate that fruit — and more of it — when it was cut than when we served it whole," she said.

Making the food more convenient to eat — serving peeled oranges, for instance — is another strategy. Because students often have short lunch periods with little time to eat, schools have to make it easier to consume those foods quickly, especially now that kids are required to select either a fruit

or vegetable at each meal, Chong said.

It turns out all of these strategies are paying off. A study by the Harvard School of Public Health comparing eating habits at four schools before and after the new Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids regulations went into effect found that fruit selection went up by 23 percent and the consumption of vegetables per student increased by 16.2 percent.

Another study published in the journal *Childhood Obesity* found that at schools that provided healthy foods mostly or entirely a la carte or through vending programs, middle-school-age kids ate 26 percent more fruit, 14 percent more vegetables and 30 percent more whole grains throughout the day.

Revenues from school lunches are also on the rise, indicating that parents are more confident that their children will get healthier meals while at school and are willing to pay for them, Kane said.

The true sign of success, though? Children, including those in Dallas, are asking their parents to buy the foods they're being served at school.

Now, that's what you might call a true food revolution. ●