

CONSUMING NEWS

Dining Out on School Lunches

If you haven't heard by now, there are big changes brewing in Illinois with regards to the types of food served at our schools. Upon review of school lunch programs, we not only gained great insight to the challenges food service administrators face, but also some shocking facts about the types of foods currently offered and why.

The vast majority of out-sourced and in-house prepared school menus today are modeled after the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and participation in the federal program is as widespread in the suburbs as it is in the city, encompassing all community income profiles. The NSLP "provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches" to eligible children in need and "cash subsidies" to schools for each such meal served. The schools in return must adhere to nutrition guidelines set forth by the Feds. This is where just some of the confusion starts.

Vicki Mascitti has been in the food service industry for 28 years and is currently the Food Service Director for District #70 in Chicago Heights. She says the biggest differences she's seen between school lunches now and then is that twenty years ago more kids brought lunch from home and parents seemed to be more active in trying to control what their kids were eating. Perhaps, this is what spurned Governor Blagojevich to push for a ban on junk food and soda in Illinois elementary and middle schools...more on that later.

Nutritional Nightmares

The Federal nutritional requirements call for schools to "meet the applicable recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans", noting that fat should be no more than 30% of caloric intake (with less than 10% coming from saturated fat) and that meals should provide 1/3 of the Recommended Dietary Allowances for protein, vitamins A & C, iron, calcium and calories. The Feds also say that decisions about "what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school food authorities."

Theoretically, this sounds like a pretty good plan, until you start digging into the "Menu Planning Options" provided by the NSLP. There are currently four menu models offered which illustrate calorie and nutrient counts per age and food groups. Instructions for pasta products that qualify as being "Enriched and Fortified with Protein", listed by each manufacturer's name and something called "Attachment D" which gives detail on the "Grains/Breads Requirement for the Food Based Menu" are also included with these plans.

What stands out most among these documents, in our opinion, are the provisions for what foods can be considered 'Grains/Breads'. Foods that qualify as a grain or bread "must be whole-grain or enriched or made from whole-grain, or enriched meal or flour", this is where the nutritional loophole begins. The following foods can qualify: bread, biscuits, rolls, buns, bagels, breaded and battered coatings on other foods, pizza crust, croustons, pastas, rice, tortillas and taco shells, muffins, granola bars and grain fruit bars, cereals (cooked and ready-to-eat), pancakes, waffles, toaster pastries, coffee cake, doughnuts, sweet rolls, cookies, cakes, pie crust, and non-sweet snack products such as: pretzels, crackers and chips. (Yes 'chips'!)

BIG QUESTION: How can low value nutritional foods such as, coffee cakes, doughnuts and the like, qualify as being breads and grains? **ANSWER:** When they are made with "enriched meal or flour" according to the NSLP guidelines.

This concept is best explained by the information provided in the USDA Food Pyramid where the Grain Group is divided into 2 categories: whole grains and refined grains. Because refined grains (white: flours, breads and rice) have been "milled", consumers are directed to make sure the word "enriched" is listed with the grain ingredient on the package to insure certain vitamins have been added back after processing. Fiber is not added back to refined grains and to make things even more difficult, some bread and grain products are made from a mixture of both whole and refined grains.

The Pyramid also says we should "make half our [daily] grains whole". And for any food to be considered a whole-grain, the FDA says it must: contain 51% or more of whole grain ingredients, be low in fat and have "whole" or "whole grain" appearing before the first ingredient name. (Claims such as: Enriched Flour, Wheat Flour, Multi-grain, Stone-ground, 100% Wheat, Cracked Wheat, Seven-grain and Bran, are not whole grain products in most cases.) Corn Dogs and Chicken Nuggets with enriched coating certainly don't make the grade here.

In Mrs. Mascitti's school district, the NSLP is available to 80% of the student population, yet the sale of Flaming Cheetos on her ala carte menu is her biggest money maker. However, if Mrs. M. offered Cheetos on her NSLP menu, with the hot lunch entrée of the day, she would actually receive federal credit for doing so because enriched corn meal, is the first ingredient listed on the back of every Cheetos bag.

Hope is on the Illinois Horizon

The potential now exists for Cheetos and other such NSLP acceptable nutrition misfits to be axed from school lunch rooms with Illinois' new junk food ban. According to Mrs. Mascitti, many schools began making changes to their menus upon the announcement of the proposal. Her district now offers whole grains, fresh fruit, 100% juices, plain bottled water and has done away with fried foods replacing them with baked meals only.

When the food ban press release came out last March, pizza was mentioned among the brief list of banned junk foods. Hopefully, this is an indicator that the state will also be taking a closer look at hot lunch lines too. Since the Feds left the door open to state authorities with regards to what foods are served and how they are prepared, Illinois has the power to not only ban junk food but bump all the other nutrient deficient foods off the prepared menus completely.

Although the ban became effective with the start of the 2006-07 school year, a listing of foods which do and don't qualify as junk have yet to be produced by the state. Debates between the ISBE (Illinois State Board of Education) and the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR), combined with school district requests for a say in the matter have delayed the guideline release until January 2007. Until then, school food improvements remain discretionary to

each district.

The job of any school food director is hampered by hard to please finicky eaters with an intense desire for finger foods. When Mascitti first tried carrot sticks alone, the kids threw them around, when she offered them with dip, they went for it. (Moms and Food Directors have a lot in common.) The same held true for broccoli - she says she had to throw away entire trays but when she tried it again with cheese sauce, they ate it up. And of course, her best selling vegetable is corn - no surprise there.

"When you give the kids a choice between canned fruit and fresh fruit, they eat it. If you offer just one, they won't. They even turn down bananas and opt for sliced apples in a bag instead. And given the choice, kids will stand in line for the ala carte items first."

What will kids do when the state gives their beloved snack line a high value nutrition makeover? Brace yourselves...an epidemic of Cheeto withdrawal is just around the corner.

Special thanks to Vicki Mascitti for helping us sort through government guidelines for school lunches. For more information on the NSLP and the Illinois Junk Food Ban, log onto the Illinois State Board of Education's website at: <http://www.isbe.net/nutrition>. To research your school's nutritional lunch values, contact your school district or log onto their food service provider's website if outsourced.

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Geek Tweak

Help for the technically challenged

When it comes to computers, there's nothing more aggravating for non-geek PC users than not being able to access email, surf the 'net or even boot up because of computer infection - even when you've done all the things you're supposed to do like protect yourself with anti-virus software, have a firewall in place and not open emails from people you don't know. So here's the question: what else can we do?

According to Agent Quantas Pickett from our local Geek Squad Precinct, the top 3 things we can do to help protect ourselves further (and they won't even cost a thing to do them either) are:

3) Put the kibosh on forwards galore - Beyond not opening emails from people you don't know, keep an eye on all that stuff you receive from people you do know that's been forwarded TONS and TONS of times. Bottom line: the bigger the forward chain, the higher the risk of infection.

2) Stop seeking sin sites - Gambling and Porn sites pose the biggest problem for PC users. The lack of internet regulation and policing combined with a high volume of traffic makes these sites highly vulnerable to infectious computer disease. ESPN.com won't hurt you, but BEAT DA SPREAD.com will. If it's obscure, don't go there.

1) Control your itchy clicker finger - The #1 sure fire way to invite adware and viruses into your computer is to click when you should have just closed with regards to all those annoying pop-ups that have yes/no questions attached. If you click on one of the answers, as opposed to clicking on the little red box with the "x" in the upper right corner of the window, you may be setting yourself up for infection. And, in many cases, it doesn't matter whether you answer 'yes' or 'no' in the first place, because just by answering the question one way or another you can unleash an internet beast.

Agent Pickett explains it like this: "Keep in mind, that when you log onto the internet, the page you see before you is actually loaded onto your pc temporarily to be able to view it. So while you're on that site, it's attached to your pc and anything you do on the site, can be attached as well."

Special Agent Marc Zider, (kind of like the grand pooh-bah of Geek agents), further stresses that keeping all PC protection, whether it be virus protection or a firewall, up to date is critical. Zider also says, "Avoid giving your email address out over the phone, or when applying for credit cards or making online purchases, it will help you prevent spam and lessen the chance of identity theft. For those things that require an email address, create a free Yahoo, Hotmail or Google account to use to receive confirmations and such."

Special thanks to the Special Agents and the Geek Squad crew for allowing us to pick their brains on behalf of non-geek users everywhere! We plan on consulting them as much as possible.

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