

Ingredients for a Healthy School Lunch Movement

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From a comfortable distance, the solution to the childhood obesity problem sounds deceptively easy: children need to move more and eat healthier foods.

Yet, as you examine the many causes of childhood obesity, the simple solution is not quite as simple as it sounds. Encouraging children to adopt healthy habits is challenging because unhealthy eating and sedentary lifestyles are engrained in our culture.

Colorado often is dismissed from the obesity conversation because it is known as the “leanest state” in the nation. Technically this is true among adults, though when 55.3 percent of the state’s adult population is classified as overweight or obese, we hardly hold bragging rights.

While Colorado’s adults fare better than grown ups elsewhere, the state is not immune to the childhood obesity epidemic. As reported in the *2009 Colorado Health Report Card*, 14.2 percent of Colorado children ages 10 to 17 years old are obese. According to data from the National Survey of Children’s Health, the percentage of obese children in Colorado is growing dramatically. In just four years, Colorado fell from having the third best childhood obesity rate in the nation to ranking 23rd.

In general, schools in Colorado (and elsewhere) are poorly equipped to address an obesity epidemic that compromises student health and potentially interferes with academic achievement. Even when school food service departments possess great creativity and nutritional expertise, they are limited by tight budgets caused in large part by low federal meal reimbursements. Schools often respond to such limitations by serving processed foods that require less equipment, time, and expertise than cooking from scratch. Instead, they offer students more “competitive foods” that sell well but offer little nutritional value. Districts typically lack sufficient funding to purchase equipment that assists in healthy scratch cooking. They also lack the professional expertise to prepare tasty, cooked-from-scratch meals.

SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE: THE SOLUTION, NOT THE PROBLEM

To encourage schools to provide health care services, health and nutrition education, and high-quality physical education

(along with other opportunities for physical activity) while serving healthier food in cafeterias and vending machines, we need as many allies as possible.

In 2008 the Colorado Health Foundation invested in the Children’s Health Foundation – a small but effective non-profit in Colorado’s Western slope – to support the Garfield RE-2 school district of 5,000 students to transition to a healthy scratch cooking program. With help from Kate Adamick, a school food systems consultant and principal of New York-based Food Systems Solutions, the district completed a school meal assessment. Adamick recommended changes to promote efficiency, healthy scratch cooking, and strong wellness policies.

During the last two years, the foundation invested in funding for intensive training, equipment, and educational events to support this initiative. As a result, the Garfield RE-2 district has fully transitioned to a scratch cooking operation, offering salad bars at each site, and eliminating flavored milk and unhealthy à la carte items. An evaluation of the program shows that students in Garfield RE-2 are eating the new foods. Students also are consuming a greater variety of fruits and vegetables, and there is less food waste. Finally, the overall cost of food has declined, and labor costs associated with healthy food changes have stabilized.

A key ingredient to Garfield RE-2’s success is the school food Culinary Boot Camp training, combined with follow-up support for food service staff. The Cook for America Culinary Boot Camp curriculum was developed by Adamick and Andrea Martin, a professionally trained chef from New York City. Martin is a state-certified teacher who specializes in school lunch reform projects and integrating wellness-based educational initiatives into the school community. The boot camps cover all basic competencies necessary to prepare food service directors, kitchen managers, lead cooks, and support staff to run professional, cooked-from-scratch school lunch operations.

Participants at these boot camps engage in some serious hard work. But the events also are inspirational. School food service personnel are transformed into school “lunch teachers” and “culinary ambassadors” who embrace their crucial role in nurturing America’s school children.

Following the experience with Garfield RE-2, we wanted to replicate the success in other districts throughout the state. In the fall of 2008 we convened a group of Colorado food service directors to hear them talk about what was going well with their programs and what challenges they faced. We realized that our key allies also were singled out as scapegoats for the childhood obesity problem. Food service directors often are put on the defensive rather than enlisted in crafting the solution. So, we have learned to listen more and blame less. Food service employees truly care for the children they feed every day. Harnessing that commitment and providing tools to help food service directors have made all of the difference.

In developing our approach, we relied on other promising programs, including the Orfalea Foundation's *s'Cool Food Initiative* in Santa Barbara County, California. That program uses a similar formula of school meal program assessment, training, and education developed by Adamick and Martin. We are privileged to have Ann Cooper acting as food service director at Boulder Valley School District, putting a spotlight on the issue in Colorado.

We hosted one boot camp in the summer of 2009 to assess interest among districts and potential impact. Seeing promise on both fronts, we began looking for a nonprofit partner to take ownership of the program. In early 2010 we funded LiveWell Colorado, a nonprofit organization committed to reducing obesity in Colorado by promoting healthy eating and active living, to host four more boot camps during the summer. Since 2008, five large school districts with enrollment of more than 60,000 students have completed school meal assessments. Meanwhile, representatives from 41 school districts participated in boot camps. We have found that there is overwhelming interest in the program and that funding for training and equipment has allowed districts to fully exercise their creativity and find local solutions that result in healthier meals for students.

COMMON SCHOOL MEAL MYTHS

Implementing the programs has helped us debunk some common myths about school meals and how to make them healthier.

- **Cooking from scratch requires more labor.** Our assessments show that schools typically do not need a larger workforce, but a highly trained (and motivated) workforce is needed.
- **Healthy meal programs are more expensive than the alternative.** The cost of a meal program is determined by a complex equation that includes more factors than the cost of raw whole ingredients. Some of our early school district partners report their food costs declined in some instances.
- **Kids will not eat healthy foods.** We have seen a stampede to a salad bar for kumquats. We know of one food service director who is routinely thanked by students for preparing delicious meals. It is hard to say for sure why some schools struggle with participation, but it seems as though engaging students and families in the change process and having

a school environment that encourages health through education and policies help.

The bottom line: Our experience suggests that successful healthy school meal programs need supportive district administration; willing food service leadership; strong nutrition education and school wellness policies; food service training to build scratch cooking skills and management techniques; and basic equipment capacity. While higher federal meal reimbursements could improve meals even more, better ingredients will not necessarily result in delicious healthy meals without the right skills and equipment.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Moving forward, we know we need to listen and learn more, and we are looking to the “lunch teachers” in our midst to lead the way. We will continue to expand this program through an ongoing partnership with LiveWell Colorado to reach more school districts.

We will begin training a team of local Colorado chefs to lead boot camps and provide ongoing follow-up support to schools. We also will explore connections to a growing Farm-to-School effort, also led by LiveWell Colorado and funded by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, which is facilitating a federal grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Additionally, we are exploring how we can train school administrators to support changes to encourage healthier meals and overall healthy schools. As a next step, we may even train parents to work with schools on meal program improvements.

Though changing the paradigm in school food is a challenging proposition, the results are worthwhile as evidenced by this note from one of our partner food service directors in response to the television show *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, which brought the dilemma of the childhood obesity problem to a national audience:

Watching *Food Revolution* has opened my eyes to see what I must have been like when you first came to my district. I know I came off defensive and rebellious just like some of the cooks on the TV program. When the nutrition service director came into the meeting with Jamie loaded with her federal regulation books, I nearly fell off the chair laughing. Boy, was that me a year ago or what? I just want to thank you for your honesty, patience, understanding, and encouragement through the whole process. I am a better person personally and professionally today because of it. I am excited and honored to be standing with the rest of you to make a difference in the lives of our children.

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