Healthier school menu options now available

New regulations ensure children have access to nutritionally balanced meals

By Meghann Finn Sepulveda

Children heading back to school this year may notice new menu options for breakfast and lunch as well as healthier selections in vending machines for snacks.

As part of new federal requirements, these changes are intended to improve the overall health and well-being of children, increase the consumption of nutritious food and reinforce the development of good eating habits.

During the 2013-2014 school year, Mesa Public Schools' food and nutrition department served 37,077 lunches and 17,598 breakfasts per day.
Source: Mesa Public Schools
Image: Thinkstock

Menu changes

New mandates now require all grains to be whole-grain-rich, as opposed to last year when only half of the grain items on the menu needed to be whole-grain-rich.

These changes were designed to reflect the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which were developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"Children will now see items such as brown rice, whole grain pasta and whole wheat pizza crust on the menu," said Cara Peczkowski, registered dietitian and co-director for the Arizona Department of Education school nutrition programs.

Fruit offerings have increased to one cup daily at breakfast (half a cup at lunch) and include whole fruit or 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice without added sweeteners.

"Menu planners can choose if students are served all items or they can implement the 'offer versus serve' concept, where students are offered all menu items but are only required to put a certain number of items on their tray," Peczkowski said.

Nutrition education

Schools are also teaching students how to properly peel, cut and eat many different kinds of fruit and vegetables, even if they may not look appealing at first glance. Nutrition staff members will often encourage children to take and try something new.

For example, Sandra Schossow, registered dietitian and director of food and nutrition for the Peoria Unified School District (PUSD), said that the district served kiwi in all of its school cafeterias last year. One of Arizona's largest school districts, PUSD currently has more than 36,000 students in 33 elementary schools, seven high schools and one non-traditional high school. "It took some time to educate the students on how to eat it [kiwi], but once we cut it open, they were willing to try it."

➤More info

Arizona Department of Education
azed.gov; 602-542-5393; 800-352-4558

U.S. Department of Agriculture
usda.gov (search for 'school nutrition')

Reducing waste

Nutrition staff members are constantly analyzing the way food is presented to ensure there is less waste.

"We consider the age of the children and the time it takes to eat," Schossow said. "We cut oranges since peeling takes time and we slice apples because biting one whole might be difficult for younger students with loose teeth."

Many schools now offer fruit and vegetable bars that are stocked with fresh and colorful options, especially those that pack nutrients like dark leafy greens. In PUSD's schools, low-fat and fat-free salad dressings are tested by students, Schossow said. "If it doesn't taste good, it's not worth putting out there," she said.

Sodium reduction

Another new regulation decreases the amount of sodium allowed in school meals.

However, the federally mandated sodium requirements are not going to be drastically different from our state nutrition standards that were already in place, Peczkowski said. "Arizona schools have already implemented lower than required sodium levels in their menus," she added.

'Competitive foods'

What may be considered the most noticeable change this school year are the new standards for the 'competitive foods' program.

As required by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued nutrition standards for competitive foods and beverages sold outside of the federal reimbursable school meals program during the school day.

The standards set limits on calories, salt, sugar and fat in foods and beverages and promote snack foods that have whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits, vegetables or protein foods as their main ingredients. Typically, these food items are found in vending machines, school stores, snack bars or are used for fundraising programs.

Loretta Zullo is a registered dietitian and director of food and nutrition for Mesa Public Schools, the largest school district in Arizona with 82 schools and approximately 64,000 students. She said that food and beverage manufacturers will need to make adjustments to meet the new criteria for competitive foods. "Not only are portion sizes reduced, but sports drinks and chips will be replaced with healthier options," she noted.