

School Lunch Changes Annoy Some Students

EMILY CHRISTENSEN, Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier

CEDAR FALLS, Iowa (AP) — On any given day, Cedar Falls High School students have several options when filling their lunch trays.

For instance, recently students were offered several hot lunch entrees, including a turkey dog (with or without a side of chili), a ham and cheese sandwich on a whole grain bun, a prepackaged Smucker's Uncrustables, a yogurt and cheese combo or one of several full-size salads. There were also grapes, bananas, pineapple chunks, apples, pears, side salads and prepackaged baby carrots.

While the new Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was designed to get students eating healthier, many Cedar Falls students, like sophomore Emily Le, said it just means they are eating less at school and more at home.

"I don't want to spend money on food I'm not going to eat," said Le, who opted to drink a cold coffee beverage while her friends picked at their hot lunches.

State legislation forced school food service directors to rethink a la carte options several years ago, but new federal guidelines, announced last year and implemented at the beginning of this year, have hit the main lunch line. Smaller entree portion sizes and more fruit and vegetable options sound like a good thing in theory, but many students have said the options aren't very palatable in practice.

Many students long for the days when pasta, taco and salad bars were the norm and condiments weren't doled out like luxuries. They miss regular doses of processed chicken nuggets and pizza not prepared on whole grain crusts.

Other students say when they finish hot lunch they head to the seriously slimmed down a la carte line and stock up on granola bars, Pop-Tarts, Rice Krispies Treats, baked potato chips and other snacks.

"We're still hungry," said sophomore Logan Ryan.

In addition to adding more fruits and vegetables to the menu, food service directors have downsized portions to follow the law. Victoria Ecker, Cedar Falls nutrition services supervisor, said it has been a problem.

"We have to follow regulations which only allow for 2 ounces of meat for a lunch entree for high school students," Ecker said, "and you know that is not enough."

Heather Bathen, Waterloo schools director of food services, hasn't heard similar complaints about portion size, however many East High Schools students last year were already criticizing the healthy options the district began to offer as a way of easing into the new requirements.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

Jacque Bilyeu Holmes is a farm-to-school coordinator for the Center for Energy & Environmental Education on the University of Northern Iowa campus. She works with several small Northeast Iowa school districts to meet the federal requirements and add locally grown food and from-scratch cooking to their menus.

She said public resistance has been difficult for some districts, but they see the changes as a positive.

"This is a good thing. These changes are better for kids," Holmes said. "We've had push back, with kids saying 'Oh, we're hungry.' But there are so many fruits and vegetables. I had a student say they can't get full on fruits and vegetables, that it is 'rabbit food.' But you can get full off of rabbit food. This is just a paradigm shift. A meal is not just meat and potatoes. That is kind of how we got in trouble with our obesity rate in the first place."

Holmes said parents should support schools' efforts by offering more fruits and vegetables at home and talking about where food comes from.

Caleb Iehl, a Cedar Falls sophomore, understands "rabbit food" is good for him. He knows spinach is more nutritious than iceberg lettuce. He doesn't mind eating salads. Sometimes he even chooses them over items like chili dogs. His friends also like the sliced pepper sticks.

However, making healthy choices can be hard when he is allowed only one small packet of dressing to cover his full-size salad. So he also grabbed a smaller side salad to get another dressing packet.

"There was one girl who used to bring a glass jar of dressing every day," he said. Others have contemplated bringing bottles of ketchup, since that condiment has been severely limited, too.

Ecker said the sodium content in condiments dictates the portions. The district is looking at a reduced sodium option so students could take two packets. Food manufacturers also are working to cut sodium, but Ecker said most options are not yet available through the district's food co-op.

Holmes said many smaller districts reduce sodium using scratch cooking. That luxury is unavailable to Doug Nefzger, Cedar Falls director of business affairs, given the district's limited preparation space. In addition to baking, Holmes said, districts are tweaking recipes to cut sodium and add vegetables. Her next goal is to eliminate processed meats — like the chicken nuggets high school students love so much — from lunch menus.

Cedar Falls High School Principal Rich Powers said he still eats in the school lunchroom on a near daily basis.

"Honestly, I enjoy it. I think there are some things you just need to try. There are a lot more fruit and vegetable options, but there are also just a lot of options for

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everything," he said. "But, my tastes are different than others."

He also understands that portions appropriate for "someone who is getting a little older and not as active" might not satisfy an athlete or a growing teenager.

"Unfortunately there is never going to be a one-size-fits-all solution, and certainly in our building the span of need is very wide," he said. "... I think the district is doing a great job given the parameters that were set. Anytime a decision is made at a national or state level, from that 50,000-foot vantage point, there are bound to be challenges."

The new lunch requirements also present a budgetary challenge. Nefzger's self-sufficient food service has to deal with increased costs --- both from inflation and the added expense of fruits, vegetables and other healthier options --- and decreased sale of lunches, especially at the elementary level.

Sharon Miller, a spokesperson for the Waterloo schools, said her district actually served more meals this year than last. However, the district's free and reduced lunch rate also increased from 64 percent in October 2011 to 65.5 percent in October 2012. Miller said the district's partnership with the Black Hawk County Health Department and Food Corps, both of which offer nutrition education and taste tests, have helped smooth the way for the changes.

The federal government also offers financial support to districts that follow the guidelines. Certified districts are eligible for a 6-cent per meal reimbursement. While that may not seem like much, it is the first time a subsidy exceeding the cost of inflation has been offered in more than 30 years.

"We will deal with it, we will work through it, and we will adjust," Nefzger said. "I view this year as a transition year, and we will see where we are at when we get to spring and make adjustments as necessary."

Source URL (retrieved on 04/27/2015 - 1:22pm):

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