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Bigger Isn't Always Better

By Jennifer Nelson

THE SMELL OF “mystery meat” and fried foods dripping with grease waft through the doors of the school cafeteria. Calories and sugar bombard the plates as kids load up on high-fat pizzas and large brownies. And, don’t forget the all-too-common meal of a candy bar and can of soda that are purchased from vending machines. Sound familiar? At one time, these descriptions characterized a typical school cafeteria.

Fast-forward to the last few years when concern about childhood obesity really hit the news. In September 2006, U.S. News & World Report explained that since 1980, rates of obesity have doubled in children and tripled in teens. The National Survey of Children’s Health states that 31 percent of children and

adolescents in the U.S. are overweight or obese. Even more alarming is that the rate of overweight and obese children in Texas is higher than the nation as a whole. The Texas Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Division explains, “more than 35 percent of Texas children are considered overweight or obese.”

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Jamie Oliver, a famous British chef, has often been featured in the media since these types of reports surfaced. He first began with successfully lobbying then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair to increase funding for more nutritious school lunches and to restrict junk food sales in schools as a first step in curbing the obesity epidemic. Mr. Oliver also

began to go school-to-school in England to help the food service departments change their menus.

“It’s all about making radical changes to the school meals system and challenging the junk food culture by showing schools they can serve fresh nutritious meals that kids enjoy eating,” he says on his website, www.JamieOliver.org.

After he successfully turned the British school system in a more healthy direction, he then focused his energy on the U.S. In a 2005 interview with ABC News, Mr. Oliver said, “America has some of the most unhealthy kids in the world with regard to obesity, Type II Diabetes; and I just think it’s a shame.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service also immediately took action and required school districts to provide healthier options if they participated in the National School Lunch, School Breakfast or After-School Snack programs, which are government-funded. Individual states then began to make changes. The Texas Department of Agriculture created the Texas Public School Nutrition Policy and a comprehensive website about nutrition and health at www.squaremeals.org. The policy includes regulations for schools on:

- Eliminating access to Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value (soda water, water ices, chewing gum and certain candies) on elementary campuses and restricting access at secondary schools
- Eliminating deep-fat frying of foods
- Requiring appropriate portion sizes
- Requiring schools to offer more fruits and vegetables daily
- Eliminating food with trans fats
- Requiring schools to adhere to Recommended Daily Allowances (RDA) for each grade/age level

NORTH TEXAS SCHOOLS

The good news – and yes, there is some – is that most school districts in the North Texas area participate in the National School Lunch, School Breakfast and/or After-School Snack programs.

Therefore, meals are regulated by the federal and state policies.

Debera Tredennick, the director of the Child Nutrition Department for Frisco Independent School District (FISD), says Frisco is especially ahead of the game when it comes to nutrition. “We were one of the first in the state to plan our menus so they meet strict guidelines – even more strict than what the federal government was pushing at that time,” explains Ms. Tredennick. “We have menus that meet the requirements for fat and sugars, and while there are no requirements right now for whole grains, we’ve been using whole grains for the last several years. We even have a chicken nugget that we’re going to serve this fall that uses whole grains instead of the regular breading – and it tastes good too.”

FISD doesn’t stop at changing its menus, though. The district uses other methods to help kids learn to lead a healthy life. A nutrition educator, who is a certified teacher, collaborates with the classroom teachers on each campus to develop and teach nutrition education. Online menus and the Virtual Café on the school district’s website provide detailed nutritional information.

This virtual café provides an easy way for a parent to sit down with the child and say, “Let’s look at what they’re offering tomorrow and let’s talk about what you might want to eat,” says Shana McKay-Wortham, FISD director of communications. “It’s really good for them to have those conversations.”

In addition, FISD offers an online payment system, where parents can not only pay for a child’s meals online, but also view what meals or snacks the child has purchased. FISD also uses yearly surveys and “taste-testing” sessions with both students and parents to ensure that the food is both healthy and delicious. And, given the number of kids who eat meals and snacks daily at school – about 20,000 out of the more than 27,600 kids in FISD – the district appears to be doing a good job of keeping everyone satisfied.

Thankfully, FISD isn’t alone in

promoting healthy eating in North Texas. While representatives from these districts couldn’t be reached at press time, Prosper, Little Elm, McKinney and Plano school districts all include good information and links on their websites, including nutritional information for meals and the ability to pay online and view purchases.



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CURRENT CHALLENGES

School districts’ concern about the cost of healthy food has always been a hindrance in increasing the nutritional value of school food. In part, this was because the National School Lunch, School Breakfast and After-School Snack programs were not focused on nutritional value.

Ms. Tredennick explained these programs include participation in the USDA Commodities program. “In the past, the Commodities program had a very negative connotation – back in the old days, you’d think of peanut butter and butter,” says Ms. Tredennick.

She goes on to explain the program is now more focused on healthy foods. “Something that’s happened even in the last couple of years along with the healthy Americans push is that we can spend part of the Commodities dollars on fresh fruits and vegetables, which is

just really cool. We have many thousands of dollars that we can spend each year on Texas produce. It’s been a great program and we take advantage of it as much as we can in Frisco.”

The current economic situation makes cost-savings especially important. With food prices on the rise, the school districts are feeling the pinch. “Most of the school districts in the area are going up on their meal prices to cover the increasing costs. After looking at our food bids for this coming year, we can see our food costs going up about 10 percent – and usually we budget for about a three to four percent increase.” Ms. Tredennick assures parents, though, the district will not be raising the prices of meals this year, although some snack prices may fluctuate. “We’re going to try to hold our own this year and give our parents a break,” says Ms. Tredennick.

NOT OUT OF THE WOODS YET

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released a report in May 2008 in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* that stated the rate of obese children had reached a plateau – good news after more than two decades of steady increases. But the *New York Times* article that discussed the report said people shouldn’t get too excited yet. The article stated the report didn’t explain why the rate had leveled – whether it was just a natural lull or because of efforts to curb obesity – or if the plateau was permanent or temporary.

Government agencies and North Texas ISDs have certainly made a good start in the right direction by offering healthier choices and providing information to parents. Hopefully they will continue to do more of the same. Now the baton is passed to parents who need to both model and teach healthy behavior. Let’s continue working together to prevent the saying, “Everything’s bigger in Texas,” from being true in all cases.

Jennifer Nelson is a freelance writer living in Frisco. Website references are also listed on page 84.