Flavor Stations: Spicing Up School Meals

Quick Facts:

- Students who eat free or low-cost meals in states where the nutritional contents of lunches exceeded USDA nutritional standards are more likely to be at a healthy weight than students who receive meals in states that only marginally meet the new standards;
- In a national study by the Government Accountability Office, School Food Authorities in 48 states report plate waste as the number one challenge of implementing the new nutrition standards;
- Parents in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) observed that students were throwing out 25 to 75 percent of their school lunch;
- Low-cost interventions that allow students to have a choice in what they eat leads to less food waste;
- Flavor stations are one cafeteria change that can actively encourage students to eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Flavor stations can include seasonings such as: lemon slices, spices, seasonings, hot sauce and red pepper flakes.

School Lunch is Important

Studies demonstrate that participation in the National School Lunch Program reduces childhood obesity, poor health outcomes and food insecurity. In 2010, the federal government initiated new nutritional standards for school meals through the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act. The new standards ensure kids are offered both fruits and vegetables every day, they increase whole grain-rich foods, offer only fat-free or low-fat milk, limit calories based on a child’s age, and reduce the amount of saturated fat, trans fats, added sugars and sodium in meals.

Despite common misperceptions, Kids generally like the new meals and nutrition standards, and are eating more fruits and vegetables than they were before. However, more needs to be done to reduce total plate waste. In a national study by the Government Accountability Office, School Food Authorities in 48 states report plate waste as the number one challenge of implementing the new nutrition standards.

Spice it Up: Flavor Stations

Low-cost interventions that allow students to have a choice in what they eat leads to less food waste. Flavor stations are one cafeteria change that can actively encourage students to eat more fruits and vegetables. Flavor stations are as simple as providing additional spices at the end of the cafeteria line, or can go as far as providing a designated stand for the “flavor station” items. Flavor stations can include seasonings such as: lemon slices, pepper, cayenne seasoning, parsley flakes, garlic powder, hot sauce and red pepper flakes. The flavor station allows kids to season their vegetables and meals themselves.

What is happening in Rochester?

RCSD parents have concerns about school lunch. In Healthi Kids’ Lunch is Gross campaign parents and children advocated for changes to school lunch that would make the meals tastier and healthier for children.

In 2013-2014 working with Healthi Kids staff, parents conducted lunch observations in RCSD elementary schools. We wanted to know if kids were happy with the food that they are served and what would make it better. Together we looked at how much food was being wasted and thrown away and we talked to kids about what they like and don’t like.

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Leading National Examples

In Cincinnati Public Schools, Jessica Shelly, director of food service, created a flavor station to encourage kids to eat more of their healthy meal. They found that by allowing each child to flavor their own meal, students can create their own flavor palate and still meet the federal sodium requirements. Their flavor station includes various spices and lemon slices. In Iowa, the Decorah School District lunch team introduced a flavor station to get kids to try new vegetables but found it was a cost effective way to make the food tasty and cater towards students’ individual needs. Their flavor stations include low sodium options like dash spices, garlic powder, balsamic vinaigrette and lemon.

Flavor stations have been popping up around the country and across New York State. Some examples include: Fiorello LaGuardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts in NYC where flavor stations appear for the school’s Pizza Friday’s; Gladstone H. Atwell Middle School in Brooklyn has a pilot flavor station every Wednesday; Eleanor Roosevelt High School in NYC has a flavor station set up for pizza and pasta days; and P.S. 101Q Elementary in Flushing has a flavor station every day that includes condiments, sauces and herbs.

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Healthi Kids Recommends:

The Rochester City School District can reduce food waste and improve school meals by:

• Creating flavor stations in each school cafeteria;
• Connecting with mentor districts across the state that have flavor stations to learn best practices and implementation guidelines;
• Establishing a Youth Advisory Committee to provide input on what flavors kids would like on their station; and
• Working with PTO/PTA groups and parents to understand why kids are throwing away their meals.

About Healthi Kids

By advocating for a handful of public-policy and practice changes, the Healthi Kids Coalition is blazin a path for healthier, more active children in Rochester and Monroe County, New York. Our change agenda calls for better school food, safer play areas, food standards at childcare centers, at least 60 minutes of in-school physical activity, and policies that support breastfeeding.

Visit us at: www.healthikids.org
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Endnotes


