

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 standards¹;
- 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 standards²;
- Parents in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) observed that students were throwing out **25 to 75 percent** of their school lunch³;
- Low-cost interventions that allow students to have a choice in what they eat leads to less food waste⁴;
- 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

Despite common misperceptions, Kids generally like the new meals and nutrition standards⁷, and are eating more fruits and vegetables than they were before.⁸ 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.

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.

Parents observed that students were throwing out **25 to 75 percent** of their school lunch. Parents and students throughout elementary schools in the RCSD want better tasting healthy food options. Only half of students indicated that they actually liked their lunch. Kids wanted more variety and choice in their meals, more fruits and vegetables and wanted the food to be cooked at school so that they would look more like "home-made" food. Many kids thought the current food was bland and needed additional flavoring.



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.



Flavor Station in the Decorah (Iowa) School District offers low sodium options to students



Billerica Public Schools Nutrition Service in Massachusetts sets up a station of spices and hot sauce

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.

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.



Endnotes

1. Taber, DR, Chriqui, J., Chaloupka, FJ. (2013). Association between state laws governing school meal nutrition content and student weight status: implications for new USDA school meal standards. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 167(6): 513-9.
2. United States Government Accountability Office (2014). School lunch: Implementing nutrition changes was challenging and clarification of oversight requirements is needed. United States Government Accountability Office report to Congressional Requesters. Online Access.
3. Healthi Kids (2014). Healthy School Meals in the Rochester City School District.
4. Hakim, SM., Meissen, G. (2013). Increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables in the school cafeteria: the influence of active choice. *J Health Care Poor Underserved*. 24(2 Suppl): 145-57.
5. Gundersen, C., Kreider, B., & Pepper, J. (2012). The impact of the National School Lunch Program on child health: a nonparametric bounds analysis. *Journal of Econometrics*, 166, 79-91.
6. United States Food and Nutrition Service (2012). Final rule nutrition standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. Online Access.
7. Turner, L., Chaloupka, FJ. (2014). Perceived reactions of elementary school students to changes in school lunches after implementation of the United States Department of Agriculture's new meal standards: Minimal backlash, but rural and socioeconomic disparities exist. *Child Obes*. August; 10(4): 349-56.
8. Cohen, J., Richardson, S., Parker, E., Catalano, P., Rimm, E. (2014). Impact of the new U.S. Department of Agriculture school meal standards on food selection. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 46(4): 388-394.

About Healthi Kids

By advocating for a handful of public-policy and practice changes, the Healthi Kids Coalition is blazing 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.

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