



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Healthy Meals Provide Foundation for Better Learning Environment

by Mary Branham

Huntington, W.Va., has more pizza parlors than gyms.

That's one reason the town—which sits in the fourth fattest state, based on data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—was labeled the unhealthiest city in America by the CDC and drew the attention of British chef Jamie Oliver.

Oliver worked with lunchroom personnel at Huntington's Central City Elementary School to cut the amount of processed food they served and featured the process in his "Food Revolution" TV show. Staff made everything served in the cafeteria from scratch during the filming of Oliver's documentary, according to Principal Patrick O'Neal.

O'Neal lost 30 pounds during and after the documentary filming, feels better and has more energy. As a bonus, the food tastes better to him.

"I've had a dramatic change in my life getting rid of processed food in my diet," O'Neal said.

While O'Neal credits Oliver with opening the eyes of adults at the school, he recognizes that only individuals—and that includes children—can decide to make a change for themselves.

By and large, Central City's students didn't like the food, and O'Neal believes it's all in what the students are used to eating. With 80 percent of his students eligible for free and reduced lunch, O'Neal said it's cheaper—and easier—for parents to buy processed foods.

And that's just one challenge.

Raising Standards

Central City and other schools throughout West Virginia have been more successful in getting students to eat foods with less fat and sugar, according to a study by West Virginia University's Health Research Center.

Those changes came after West Virginia's Department of Education adopted the national Institute of Medicine's new school nutrition standards, according to Carole Harris, co-director with Drew Bradlyn of WVU's Health Research Center.

The state legislature included school nutrition in the Healthy Lifestyles Act of 2005, but that piece wasn't as strong as it could have been, Harris said. And since school breakfast and lunch programs are federal programs, legislators faced money limitations.

But the administrative route opened an opportunity for state intervention. And it seems to be working.




Many schools across West Virginia successfully implemented the new standards in the first year.

"The overwhelming majority of people believe that these standards were good things that would help improve student health and student nutrition and that they would be a benefit to students," Bradlyn said.

Because many students get as many as two meals a day there, school is a good place to model healthy behaviors, Bradlyn said. The study found that changing the food and curbing access to things like sugary sodas at

3 Things the Child Nutrition Act Would Do

The School Nutrition Association supports reauthorization for the federal Child Nutrition Act, which would:

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1 Increase federal reimbursement for school meals, helping schools to offer more fresh produce, whole grains and low fat dairy products, according to Nancy Rice, the association president.
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2 Establish federal nutrition standards for all foods sold during the school day, including vending machines and a la carte lines. "School nutrition professionals believe students should receive the same message about healthy food choices, whether they are purchased from a vending machine or in a lunch line," Rice said.
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3 Support programs that expand the reach of school meals, such as summer food service to children in high poverty areas.

**SPARKING A REVOLUTION**

HUNTINGTON, W.Va.—British Chef Jamie Oliver, left, brought his “Food Revolution” TV show to Huntington, W.Va. Oliver worked with staff at Central City Elementary School in Huntington to make over the meals served to students there. During filming of his show, the school’s staff prepared food from scratch and cut out processed foods.

Photo by Holly Farrell / ABC via Getty Images



Learn more about Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution through links at the *Capitol Ideas* website.

school also helped to change behaviors outside school.

Of West Virginia’s 55 counties, 53 don’t allow soda sales during the school day. “As soda became not available at school, it decreased the amount of soda that kids were going to drink during the day and milk became the primary beverage that was available,” Bradlyn said. The study also found that kids were eating more vegetables than they did the previous year.

But all suggested changes weren’t as easy. School nutrition managers said it was difficult to implement a school wellness policy and decrease the marketing of unhealthy foods on school campuses.

For instance, soft drink manufacturers sponsor many high school sports scoreboards, and groups ranging from the school PTA to athletics teams earn money through sales of such items.

Cost and Availability

And then there are twin challenges of cost and availability.

“Schools must stretch every penny to serve well-balanced, nutritious meals,” said Nancy Rice, director of the Georgia Department of Education’s School Nutrition Division and president of the School Nutrition Association, an organization serving school food service professionals.

The federal government reimburses schools \$2.68 for lunch, but the average cost to prepare it is \$2.92, Rice said. Choosing healthier foods packs a punch to school cafeteria budgets. In

Alexandria, Va., for instance, the 12,000-student district paid an extra \$75,000 in a year just to switch to whole grain sandwich buns. And Georgia’s Cobb County schools were out \$133,000 more just to switch from 8-ounce drinks containing 50 percent juice to 4-ounce drinks containing 100 percent juice, said Rice.

In Huntington, W.Va., O’Neal’s school will go back to using some processed foods this year simply because the costs for all home-made were unsustainable, he said. Oliver’s production company picked up the tab during filming.

Some states—including California, Colorado and Hawaii—supplement the federal funding by a few pennies per meal, Rice said, and that helps.

“School meals programs operate under extremely tight budgets, so this additional revenue provides critical funds to help schools serve an even wider variety of healthy foods and explore innovative ways to inspire children to make the right food choices at school and at home,” said Rice.

Costs can rise even more in states like mountainous West Virginia, which doesn’t have a large agricultural base, said Del. Bonnie Brown of East Charleston. “It’s tough to get some of those good healthy foods into the schools,” she said.

She acknowledges the lack of availability of healthy foods—and the overabundance of the sugar- and fat-laden counterparts—contributes to the obesity and overweight population, as well as to the development of tastes for healthy foods.

“I think it’s a cultural thing,” she said. “People aren’t used to eating healthy foods.”

Changing Tastes

But tastes can change, and people can make healthier choices, as seen in the WVU study. Getting kids involved in the decision-making for school meals can aid that change, said Melissa Musiker, director of science policy, nutrition and health for the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

“Once kids are involved in the planning process and decision-making process, they have ownership of it; they want it to work,” Musiker said.

That challenge was clear in the Central City students’ rejection of the new school menu. But the challenge is not so great that it can’t be overcome, according to Yvonne Butler, principal of Browns Mill Elementary and Magnet School just outside Atlanta, the nation’s first sugar-free school.

Adults at the school modeled the behavior they were expecting from kids when the school made the switch 10 years ago. “I don’t really like broccoli, but I did for them,” Butler said.

The change to healthier eating in school, which has been the subject of studies by groups such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, helped improve test scores and cut discipline problems, Butler said.

That’s not surprising, according to Musiker. “Kids who are getting the right nutrition are better learners,” she said. 