



New System Lets Parents Monitor School Lunch

Kids may think “Big Mother” is watching them, but it’s shaping up to be a trend of the future: parental online tracking of what kids are choosing on the school cafeteria menu and how many helpings they’re taking.

The online tool enabling this capability is Primero Food Service Solutions, developed by Cybersoft Technologies, Houston. The new software allows parents to track their children’s food selections and make changes via prepaid cafeteria accounts. The system alerts cashiers to any food allergies or parent-set diet restrictions on a student’s account. In such cases, the student is not permitted to purchase the item in question.

The new system is already in use in some schools in Arizona, Oklahoma, Michigan and Tennessee, and the Houston Independent School District is gearing up for a trial. The pilot will take place this summer at five Houston schools, including a mix of elementary, middle and high schools. Afterward, the program will be customized based on parental feedback and phased in over the new school year at all 305 schools in the district, says Adriana Villarreal, deputy press secretary. For example, parental options might include limiting the number of times a student can take more food or perhaps limiting certain types of food, such as chocolate milk, if the parent prefers that the student drink skim milk.

“After we publicized our plans to provide this option, we got a great response from parents,” Villarreal comments.

While the large Houston district has been very proactive in anti-obesity initiatives—making sure menu items are low in fat while not compromising taste—this is not enough to help students make the right choices, Villarreal points out. “Eating habits are formed when children are young, so our health objectives cannot be achieved without parental involvement.”

The system, which will cost Houston \$5.3 million, also enables the district to plan menus and enroll students in free- and reduced-price plans more efficiently.

Kids Worldwide Getting Fatter

Even as the Houston Independent School District and other school systems are poised to enhance anti-obesity initiatives, it appears the fight against fat during childhood is getting tougher.

By 2010, more than half of all children in North and South America (as compared with a third now) and 38% of all children in the European Union will be overweight, according to a new report published by the *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity*.

In addition, 25% of all children in China will be overweight by 2010; moreover, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Mexico, Chile, Brazil and Egypt can expect similar problems, according to the report.

“The Western world’s food industries, without even realizing it, have precipitated an epidemic with enormous health consequences,” comments Dr. Philip James, chairman of the International Obesity Task force, who wrote the report. “This is going to be the first generation that’s going to have a lower life expectancy than their parents.”

Researchers studied published medical reports on obesity from 1980-2005 and also utilized information from the World Health Organization (WHO). They analyzed data on school-age children from 25 countries and preschoolers from 42 countries.