



Assignment: Get Kids to Make Better Choices

The hottest trend impacting school foodservice menus this year isn't about new flavors or food fads; it's the escalating battle against obesity.

From the recent pledge by major beverage companies to stop selling soda in elementary and middle schools, to state and local attempts to pass junk food bans, everyone is trying to make school food more healthful and less fattening. And the sooner the better.

According to a newly released American Demographics analysis, the U.S. is the world leader in obesity: Nearly 23% of the world's obese population aged 15 or older lives right here, and the growing consensus is that the school cafeteria is the front line of defense. Yet schools have been working to improve menus, even beyond USDA requirements, with mixed results. The main problem: teaching students to accept the healthful offerings put in front of them.

Innovative strategies have been adopted toward this end. A pilot study to prevent obesity and diabetes among children and adolescents is a case in point. To be implemented this fall in the Tallahassee, FL, area, the program is called Project HEALTH (Health Education and Life-Transforming Habits). Its aim is to recruit and train teachers to guide children toward healthful diets and lifestyle habits. Students at participating schools will be monitored over a five-year period. Needless to say, school foodservice should prove to be a valuable partner in this effort.

At other districts, such education has been taken to a new, technological level. Notably, a virtual cafeteria, sponsored by the School Nutrition Association, Alexandria, VA, has been created to enhance nutrition awareness among children aged eight to 15. Dubbed Whyville Cafeteria, this facility is part of a virtual universe (www.Whyville.net) enabling children around the world to interact and learn together through various educational activities.

Virtual dining is part of this experience, thanks to support from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. In the Whyville Cafeteria, students can "sit down" together at a virtual dining table to share and discuss food choices. Whyville students "fill their trays" at the "cafeteria line" (<http://www.whyville.net/press/images.html>), choosing from such fare as taco salad, spaghetti and fresh fruit. Nutrition information is displayed with every food, and students are held responsible for their choices. If a student consumes insufficient calories, the avatar—or symbolic representation of the student—becomes pale. If the student over-consumes calories, the avatar turns ruddy. Lack of fruits could lead to unsightly scurvy sores.

Indeed, new technology is an increasingly important weapon in the battle to teach kids to make better food choices. For example, Georgia's Gwinnett Public School District has installed a new program called Nutri-Café, available from Nutri-Link Technologies, Atlanta. This Web-based nutrition information portal enables students and parents to view menu offerings and plan healthful school meal selections together. Thus, students arrive for breakfast and/or lunch prepared to make well thought-out choices. The advance preparation expedites line movement as well, so students will actually have enough time to consume the healthful foods they have chosen.

