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School lunch in a pickle

Healthy options on the rise but many kids still resist them

By Debra Melani , Special to the Rocky

Remember school lunch? The sticky macaroni and cheese, the soggy pizza squares?

And if you couldn't stomach the main entree, your cafeteria lady would offer you a low-fat yogurt or a fresh turkey wrap on a whole-wheat tortilla?

Wait, that last part doesn't ring a bell?

Fast-forward a few decades. If you visit a school today, you are likely to find those kinds of options; *fresh*, *low-fat* and *choices* have become buzzwords in the food-service field.

An increasing number of districts in Colorado are adopting "healthy" vending-machine policies, booting fryers from their kitchens and giving their students more options.

But when it comes to solving the nation's obesity crisis and improving children's nutrition, there's still a long way to go, experts agree. That feat requires a societal shift and nutrition education, especially for the kids, they say.

"It doesn't make any difference how nutritious and healthy it is if they won't take it," said Leo Lesh, executive director of Food and Nutrition Services for Denver Public Schools.

As students milled past him during lunch hour at Kunsmiller Middle School, it was clear that cheeseburger and fries seemed to be the most popular option, not salad or turkey-wraps.

Dayle Hayes, a registered dietitian from Montana who spoke to Colorado educators last month on the issue, said it's everyone's duty to change the message children receive about food and nutrition.

"It's not just important to talk about what to take out, it's really critical to talk about what to put in," Hayes said, using a recent fat-lowering shift from regular chips to baked chips in the nation's schools as an example.

"That's an improvement, but it's still a chip," she said.

With many students eating two of their three daily meals at school (breakfast is free to all DPS students), it might seem that educators have considerable power to solve the problem.

But it's not that easy, Lesh said.

For instance, why not just eliminate the less-desirable options in school? Because many kids would skip lunch, Lesh said.

A cheeseburger and fries outperforms an empty stomach, especially because DPS uses 85 percent to 90 percent lean beef, low-fat cheese and a whole-wheat bun, he said.

Or why not mandate healthy choices? DPS does require those students who buy the regular school lunch to take a fruit or vegetable side with the entree. If they don't, the cashier sends them back to get one.

"But we can't force them to eat it," Lesh said. "That's the fallacy of the whole program."

Food service workers can't be police, either, Lesh said, noting that a middle-schooler could choose a bag of chips for a quick lunch so he can save his lunch money for a CD, or an elementary student could dump an uneaten food tray so she has time to go play.

"What would you rather do: Eat a kiwi or go play kickball?" asked Bob Gorman, area supervisor at Richard T. Castro Elementary, as he watched students toss food, including kiwi fruit, into the trash cans and rush to the playground.

Budgets also restrict food-service directors' ability to boost nutrition, as healthier often means costlier in the food-purchasing business. For every additional penny Lesh spends on a student lunch, his annual costs increase \$80,000.

It's not an easy issue, but it's one worth fighting for, said Hayes, who travels the country doing so.

"We need to be giving consistent messages to kids. And we need to give food the attention it deserves. Food is fundamental to life and to our kids' school success."

From the dietitian

We recently visited three DPS schools - Castro, Kunsmiller and Abraham Lincoln High School - with **Beth Jauquet**, a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the Colorado Dietetic Association. She pointed out the best and worst lunch choices:

* **Top choices:** Turkey wrap, fajita salad, pizza

* **Worst choices:** French fries, burgers, chicken fingers

* **Top vending machine choices:** Baked Cheetos, Baked Ruffles, Snyder's pretzels, Nature Valley Granola Bar (honey wheat), Clif Bar

* **Worst vending machine choices:** Doughnuts, pastry, Funyuns, cookies, Pop-Tarts

Nutrition wish list

Beth Jauquet offers the following fixes to school lunches. If she could, she would:

* Not count french fries as a vegetable (DPS does).

* Serve salad, not fries, as a side with burger.

* Add nutrient-dense a la carte options, such as yogurt, granola bars and low-fat string cheese, next to such poor-nutrient options as Ramen noodle soups and Pop-Tarts.

* Make peanut butter sandwiches with whole wheat bread rather than buy prepackaged "Uncrustables."

* Offer 100 percent whole grain options instead of just 51 percent (still better than white).

* Ban vending machines from cafeterias.

* Replace iceberg with romaine (darker-leafed) lettuce for more nutrients.

* Offer nutrition classes.

But it's not all bad news, Jauquet says. On the bright side in DPS schools:

- * All cheese is low fat.
- * Pizza (contracted through Blackjack Pizza) is made with low-fat cheese, low-fat pepperoni and whole wheat crust.
- * Many schools in the district make bread from scratch, with 51 percent whole wheat flour.
- * All milk is 1 percent or skim, and the flavored milk must be skim to counterbalance extra calories.
- * Fresh fruit and vegetables are offered every day.
- * Students periodically have a "yogurt-basket" option, which includes low-sugar yogurt, muffin, low-fat cheese stick and milk.
- * Soda machines are shut down during meals and a half hour before and after.
- * There are no fryers in DPS kitchens anymore (but frozen, pre-packaged products can be flash-fried).

Then and now

During the past decade in Denver public schools, deep fat fryers in kitchens were nixed and lunch options for students bumped up. An example of the menu changes over the years:

- * **Feb. 14, 1995:** Sweetheart chicken nuggets, mixed vegetables, corn bread, fruit cocktail, raspberry sherbet.
- * **Feb. 14, 2008:** Meatball sub or chicken fajita, salad or turkey ranch wrap, green beans, fruited gelatin, brownie.

Fueling up

March 3-7 is National School Breakfast Week. Denver Public Schools, recognized nationally for a free breakfast program, will celebrate:

- * **When:** 8:30 a.m., March 5
- * **Where:** Teller Elementary, 12th Avenue and Garfield Street

* **How:** Superintendent Michael Bennett will award a laptop computer to the student who writes the best essay on how important it is to eat a healthy breakfast

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Montbello, East rivalry a DPS sports cornerstone

Many high school basketball fans are still talking about a Feb. 17 faceoff between Denver Prep League rivals Denver East and Montbello at Manual High's Thunderdome.

That game went down in 2007, and some say it was one of the best high school games ever played in Colorado.

The Warriors escaped with an 82-79 double overtime win, and both teams' play rekindled a rivalry that Montbello coach **David Carey** and his father, East coach **Rudy Carey**, say has always been there.

"We revived that rivalry. It's always been a rivalry, but last year with us beating them it brought that rivalry back to a peak," David Carey said.

"The three teams are kind of like a tri-rivalry," Rudy Carey said, speaking of East, George Washington and Montbello. "Because of the demographics, all of the kids know each other so well, but because of our tradition, everyone takes a shot East."

At the start of Montbello's final practice of the regular season Feb. 20 and in preparation for their much-anticipated rematch with East, 1545 Detroit St., on Feb. 21, David Carey shared some inspiring, motivational thoughts with his team.

He told his team that despite their 10-11 record as of Feb. 20, they still had work to do and more to prove.

"For you seniors in here, this is it," David Carey said.

In fact, this was it. The Warriors fell 55-46 in a tight game. The players would be left to wonder if they prepared hard enough.

In practice, both teams spent about an hour walking through some defensive and offensive scenarios, not so much their own, but that of each other's. As of Feb. 20, East was one of the top-five teams in class 5A with a 17-5 record.

"We didn't do anything special," Rudy Carey said. "We knew they were going to be well-coached. We had to prepare for their style of defense."

Rudy Carey's team knew the incentives heading into the game: beat a team that beat them last year and get one step closer to a high seed in the upcoming state tournament.

"We don't focus on beating Montbello," Rudy Carey said. "Our major objective is to win the state championship. If we win, the sun is going to come up tomorrow, and if we lose, the sun is going to come up tomorrow. It's just another basketball game on the road to what we're after."

Warriors senior **Nate Nelson** knew the significance of this game, not just to try to break even on their record, but also knowing what East likes to do.

"I'm telling my team to box out, work hard and get ready for what's coming up," Nelson said. "They like to block shots, so we have to pump fake and get them in the air."

Nelson was one of only five seniors on the team, noting that the loss of last year's seniors has made this season more challenging.

"We're going to try to do the same thing we did last year. Most of the team that was here last year was gone, so we have to work with this team."

Fellow senior **Marcus Crowder** wasn't too worried about the hype surrounding the Feb. 21 game, saying discipline was going to be the key factor to get them over the hump.

"It's another game, but we have to come ready to play," Crowder said, who didn't play in last year's matchup due to injury. "The most exciting part for me is actually being able to play."

Senior point guard **Lee Hall** echoed Crowder and Nelson's sentiments, saying the anxiety leading up to the game was immeasurable.

"I'm going to have a lot of emotions," Hall said. "It's a battle of emotions. The crowd gets emotional. You can just feel it. You get goose bumps just walking into the gym. You have to bring you're A game."

For David Carey, this practice was another opportunity to beat the Angels and gain more bragging rights against his dad.

"It's a weird thing at first (coaching against him), but I'm getting used to it," David Carey said, who coached against his father twice before coming into the Feb 21 game. "Once that ball goes up, you completely forget about who's at the other end."

Noting that people create a lot of hype because of the relationship, Rudy Carey pointed out the fine line between basketball and family and East and Montbello.

"David is my son, first and foremost, before basketball. Basketball is secondary when it comes to that," Rudy Carey said. "I always taught him to be competitive. His allegiance should be to the kids he coaches."

David Carey said that although the Warriors have had a tough year (record wise), he was proud of the fight his team showed during the season.

"We've grown as a team, and as long as I see growth in these kids, at the end of the day that's what it's about."

For East, their road to another state championship (and a fifth under Carey) continues at 7 p.m. Feb. 29 when they will face either Mountain Vista or Wheat Ridge at East in the second round of the 2008 state tournament.