

The Record

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At lunch, a whole lot of whole wheat and colorful veggies

How healthy-eating movement started

By **ALLISON PRIES**
STAFF WRITER

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Child Nutrition recently gave awards to six school districts that are encouraging healthy eating and physical activity. Four of those districts, including Allendale and Elmwood Park, get their meals and snacks through Fairfield-based Pomptonian Food Service. Mark Vidovich, president of the company, talks about the evolution of healthy eating at school and why it's working.

Q. What are some of the components of this healthy-eating movement in schools?

The School Meals Initiative, introduced in the 1990s, meant a change to how menus were designed ... to ensure that you attracted students to making healthy dining choices. It made sure schools reached certain nutritional goals. Prior to that, schools just had to make sure they had a protein, vegetables and milk with every meal.

[In September 2007], a state wellness policy addressed snacks offered to augment the meal. No snacks containing more than eight grams of fat or two grams of saturated fat ... and with sugar as the first ingredient could be served.

The idea was making sure the food choices matched what was being taught in the classroom about eating healthy.

Q. How has the school cafeteria changed as a result?

Students are discerning customers. We have to make the food appealing to the eye by presenting the salad in sleek packaging and designing it to be attractive. As opposed to some bland iceberg lettuce in a little white bowl, we might do iceberg and romaine mixed with other colorful vegetables.



VIDOVICH

Q. What is the biggest difference in today's school cafeteria from a generation ago?

The variety. There are a tremendous number of choices each day, which entices students to participate in the [healthy eating] programs. We still have treats; they're just healthier – 100 calories packs ... baked chips.

Q. Is this working?

I'm very encouraged that kids are choosing the healthier items we put out. We always had salad platters, but they weren't as popular as they are now. There are a large number of people who look for vegetarian options. When we offered whole wheat bread 10 years ago, students were not interested. Now, whole wheat is our most popular option for sandwiches, wraps – even hamburger rolls.

Q. Why do you think it's working?

Parents are now talking about nutrition. A big part of it is how they eat at home. They're taking those good habits they're learning at home and bringing them to school. And they're very happy to eat things in school that they eat at home.

When we do try new healthy menu items, we put them out for sampling, like they do in Costco. Often, kids are afraid to order something new. If it's available for tasting, they're more likely to try it and say 'I do like it' and order it next time it's on the menu.

Coming Tuesday

In "Listen Up," a Hasbrouck Heights High School junior maintains that there's no such thing as a class that's a waste.