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Arizona Schools Failing Nutritionally

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If your seventh-grade children eat Tempe Elementary District french fries, they're consuming more than 38 percent of their daily fat intake.

If they eat a Scottsdale Unified District hamburger, they're getting 18 grams of fat and 342 calories - almost twice the fat of a McDonald's hamburger.

At just about any Valley school, kids can spend their spare change buying high-calorie snacks to go with their lunch; their choices of healthful snacks are limited to the occasional yogurt and pretzels.

According to recent state audits, 55 percent of Arizona schools do not meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture standards for nutrients over a week's time. USDA standards spell out how much fat, calories, sodium, fiber and carbohydrates meals are allowed. The federal agency does not keep statistics about how states compare in nutrition requirements.

Schools often fall short in fat and saturated fat, says the Arizona Department of Education, which reviews schools that take part in the National School Lunch Program.

USDA requires that fat must be 30 percent or less of the total calories in school lunches and saturated fat must be 10 percent or less when averaged out over a week's time.

Phoenix Union High School District, Flagstaff Unified District, Glendale Elementary District and Ajo Unified District are some of the larger school districts that fell short on fat in last year's audit.

Money is the main reason schools fall short of nutritional standards, state officials say; healthful food costs more.

Labor costs also increase those costs because fresh fruits and vegetables require more preparation.

Schools generally get \$1.74 to \$2.14 from the federal government for every child who qualifies for free or reduced-price lunches. They get 20 cents for every child who pays full price.

"It's very difficult for schools to break even with the reimbursement rates," said Holly Mohr, who oversees child nutrition programs for the state.

Most school districts sell snacks, such as potato chips, ice cream and cookies, during lunch to cover costs. These snacks are not required to meet federal standards.

Snacks are most popular in schools where the kids come from wealthier families because the kids have more money to spend at lunch, food service managers said. So kids in poorer areas actually may eat more nutritious lunches because they can't afford as many snacks.

The trends come at a time of national alarm about children's eating habits and an epidemic of childhood obesity. Only 2 percent of school-age children get the recommended servings from the five food groups each day, according to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At the same time, 13 percent of children ages 6 to 11 are overweight, double the rate 20 years ago, according to a 2001 U.S. surgeon general's report.

A hungry child is distracted from learning and is more likely to experience discipline and health problems, according to the American School Food Service Association, an Alexandria, Va., group made up of food service managers.

This year is a pivotal year for child nutrition. Congress is considering the reauthorization of child nutrition programs, which include the National School Lunch Program that feeds 25 million children daily in the United States and 425,000 children daily in Arizona.

Schools that take part get cash and commodities such as meat and cheese for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve lunches that meet federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced-price lunches to children who are eligible.

Hearings taking place this month in the U.S. Senate are generating debate about the role of school lunch in reducing or preventing obesity among children.

Asking for more help

The American School Food Service Association is asking the federal government to give schools 10 cents more per meal to improve nutritional quality. The group also wants the government to fund nutrition education in schools. Nutrition education now is discretionary with no federal funding.

In Arizona, a 20-member committee of school food service directors, dietitians and nutrition advocates is expected to submit a model policy to state schools Superintendent Tom Horne. Schools that choose to adopt it would be provided with details about how to make menus exceed USDA requirements.

In several Arizona school districts, parents already have demanded more healthful menus. Tempe Elementary District refuses to sell snacks during lunch to students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Paradise Valley Unified District has one of the strictest policies in the state. The district serves nothing if sugar or lard is listed as the first ingredient.

Parents pushed for the policy in the mid-1980s because "kids could literally go and buy french fries and a soda and call that lunch," said Patty Budoff, a parent.

Food service directors blame inactivity among today's youth for rising obesity. If anything, lunches have gotten more healthful over the years, they say.

Many schools now bake chicken nuggets and french fries instead of frying. They serve 1 percent milk and fresh fruits and vegetables.

A 2001 USDA study said that fat steadily decreased in school lunches in the 1990s. Arizona's fat percentages were about the same as the national average. Its school lunches came in at 32 percent fat while the national study average was 33 percent.

"I think, for the most part, the kids eat really good," said June Cimarossa, cafeteria manager at Supai Middle School in the Scottsdale Unified District. Supai offers oranges, apples, salads, carrot and celery sticks. Fruit cocktail is added to the Jell-O.

But even those who serve fruits and vegetables at lunch say french fries are more popular than salads.

Ari George, 12, a seventh-grader at Supai, ate Flaming Hot Cheetos during a recent lunch. She doesn't eat fruits and vegetables for lunch, although "one time I had a pickle," she said.

At a school in the Tempe Elementary District, Elona Ruiz, 5, a kindergartner, ate raisins and drank milk on a recent day. She left cooked green beans.

"I don't like green beans," the Nevitt Elementary School student said.

Healthful equals trash

Food service directors say if schools served only healthful foods, their food costs would skyrocket, and the kids would dump more food in the trash.

"We try to educate and offer good, healthy items, but we can't guarantee they'll eat it," said Geoff Habgood, manager of food and nutrition for the Deer Valley Unified District.

Kids are notoriously picky eaters. Take Jeremie Gooden, 11, a fifth-grader at Nevitt Elementary School in Phoenix.

He wishes the school cafeteria would serve food from Burger King, McDonald's, Subway and Jack In The Box. He had to be content with a chicken patty sandwich, 1 percent chocolate milk and a box of raisins recently.

"This is all nasty stuff," he said, picking at the raisins.

Increasingly, kids are getting their primary nutrition from school because working parents take advantage of school-served breakfasts and after-school snacks. More than half of all children in the United States eat breakfast, lunch or a snack at school.

Arizona schools served 83.5 million lunches during the 2001-02 school year, up from 72.6 million five years ago. Breakfasts served also increased from 22.6 million to 26.3 million during that time.

As more children eat more meals at school, an even greater responsibility falls on schools and governments to ensure children eat well, said Ellen Larson, an instructor in Northern Arizona University's Health Promotion Department.

Nutritionists worry that kids are forming lifelong eating patterns that will be difficult to change, Larson said. It is hard to break habits of eating high-sodium, high-fat and high-sugar foods later in life.

The ideal school lunch would have leaner cuts of meat and would offer fish and a variety of fruits and vegetables, said Jeffrey Hampl, an assistant professor in Arizona State University's Department of Nutrition.

It is difficult to balance nutrition with foods children will eat, he said. And that, food service directors say, is their biggest obstacle.

Many children refuse to eat raw carrots and apples so schools have become creative.

Washington Elementary District in Phoenix offers peeled and sliced apples wrapped in plastic. Tempe Elementary District has "carroteenies," tiny carrots in shrink-wrapped packages.

Scottsdale Unified District serves 1 percent instead of whole milk. Paradise Valley Unified District tops pizzas with partial-skim mozzarella. Scottsdale Unified District replaced its pumps of ranch dressing with smaller portions in cups to reduce the amount of dressing students dump on veggies.

Ethnic mix

Food service managers also are paying attention to the ethnic mix within their schools, offering more Mexican meals for the higher percentages of Latino children.

Two shining stars are Cartwright Elementary and Tempe Elementary districts, according to recent reviews by the state. Both passed nutrition reviews this year.

The review looks at one week's menus and analyzes them for nutrients.

Not every meal has to measure up, but when the total number of meals is averaged over one week, USDA requirements for fat, saturated fat, calories, cholesterol, sodium, fiber and iron must be met. The review also looks at calcium, vitamin A, vitamin C, protein and carbohydrates.

The review explains why Tempe Elementary District can serve french fries with 1,077 calories to middle school students - more fat per ounce than McDonald's fries - and still pass USDA requirements. Tempe schools make up for it by serving lower-fat items on other days.

Tempe's director of nutritional services, Pam Gorowora, said having dietitians on staff helps school districts pass or get closer to passing USDA standards. The trend now among school districts is to have a registered dietitian on staff.

"It gives us an edge," Gorowora said. "We can get very creative with the menu because that's what we've gone to school for."

The state Department of Education began evaluating schools during the 1996-97 school year as part of the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children. That's the federal mandate designed to improve nutrition by analyzing nutrients in school lunches.

If schools don't meet standards, they are given suggestions about how to improve and can receive follow-up visits from the state.

Holly Mohr predicts the number of schools meeting requirements will increase from the current 55 percent as schools receive future evaluations.

Horne, the new state superintendent of schools and a former Paradise Valley School Board member, intends to look at school nutrition during his time in office.

A self-described "health nut," he was one Paradise Valley board member who pushed for the passage of a policy in the school district that prohibits foods with sugar as a first ingredient.

"I would certainly like to see 100 percent of the schools following the minimum USDA guidelines," Horne said. "I would like to see schools serve nothing that is high fat or high sugar.

"But whether or not to do something mandatory or voluntary is something we haven't faced up to yet," he said.