EdSource
Engaging Californians on Key Education Challenges

Occasional Paper

MAY 2012

San Francisco's long campaign to provide healthier school meals yields results

By Susan Frey

San Francisco Unified School District has been a national leader in improving the nutritional value of the food it serves its students. But the journey toward healthier meals has been an arduous and not-yet-completed one.

Yet San Francisco's experience holds valuable lessons for other districts. Those lessons are described in this essay, the first in a series of occasional EdSource papers on a range of challenges facing California's public schools.

Parents who want to make school lunches healthier better be in it for the long haul, warns Dana Woldow, a parent who began such a campaign in San Francisco Unified about 10 years ago. District meals have definitely improved since then, inching toward Woldow's dream of well-paid district chefs and assistants cooking meals in a functional kitchen using local organic produce and antibiotic-free meat.

"The truth is we'll probably never get there unless the country changes how it finances school meals," she said. "But if each year we move closer, then that's success."

That persistent attitude has paid off despite obstacles that healthy food advocates have faced. These include insufficient funding, facilities in poor condition, lack of administrative support, reluctant parents, high labor costs because of the city's high cost of living, and a lack of consensus as to what constitutes healthy school meals.

Photo courtesy of San Francisco Unified School District

In these tough budgetary times, the food service runs a deficit every year—more than $3 million last year. District children have healthy meals each day because the school board has decided to make it a priority.

Today San Francisco Unified serves healthier food, and a slightly higher percentage of students (about 42%) eat the lunches this year than in 2004 (about 40%), the earliest comparable figures that are available, according to Ed Wilkins, the district's director of Student Nutrition Services.

When the district's Board of Education formed the Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee (SNPAC) in 2003, the biggest sellers in the cafeteria were 20-ounce sodas, potato chips, and snack cakes that students could choose to buy separately from the regular meal—in the so-called a la carte line—if they had the money to pay for them. For many kids, that was lunch.

The a la carte food service is different from the meals served in the cafeteria through the federally subsidized free and reduced-price meals program. Although any student could buy the school meals, only low-income students receive them at no cost. When Woldow began her campaign, a la carte food items were typically served outside the school cafeteria and were open to students who wanted to buy food on their own, paying from their own pockets. In some districts, the a la carte program is run by private vendors; in San Francisco, the district ran the service itself at middle and high schools only.

Healthy food costs more

Today, the district has eliminated sodas and foods with trans fats, replacing them with whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables in all the meals it serves. But it does so at a cost. In these tough budgetary times, the food service runs a deficit every year—more than $3 million last year. District children have healthy meals each day because the school board has decided to make it a priority, closing the deficit with monies from the district's unrestricted general fund, which was more than $300 million in 2010–11.

When Woldow joined the nutrition committee, she had a dream of having a functional district kitchen where trained staff would prepare healthy meals with ingredients provided by farmers in the San Francisco Bay region.

But without additional financial support, districts must manage with federal and state funds that provide $3.01 per free meal and only $2.61 for reduced-price meals when the cost of such meals is more like $5, according to Justin Gagnon, CEO of Choice Lunch, a private company that provides healthy lunches to 18,000 children in private and public schools throughout the state.

"You have to pay for quality, believe me," Director Wilkins said. He gave the example of adding salad bars to the main menu, which Wilkins has done in almost all the district's middle and high schools as well as eight elementary schools. A grant from the city's Department of Children, Youth & Their Families paid for the salad containers, refrigeration, and initially some of the produce.

To make sure that students get at least one meal during the school day, if they come through the lunch line without money, the district provides a free meal anyway.

But the district has to supplement the costs of providing fresh produce because the federal reimbursement rates are not high enough.

The system is inherently flawed, Woldow points out, because the federal reimbursement for lunches is the same for all 48 contiguous states despite the differences in cost of living. (Hawaii and Alaska get paid more.) At San Francisco Unified, the lowest-paid food service worker earns more than $17 an hour. The district saves money by having split shifts—one for breakfast and one for lunch—keeping the number of hours low and avoiding the high cost of benefits it would have to pay for full-time staff.

Eligibility for the free and reduced-price meals program is also based on a federal formula for poverty that does not take into account the higher cost of living in California. Families may have higher incomes, but they are still struggling to make ends meet. Yet they don't qualify for the federal lunch program. To make sure that students get at least one meal during the school day, if they come through the lunch line without money, the district provides a free meal anyway. Unlike many districts, San Francisco also does not charge students the 40 cents for reduced-price meals either. (Some districts collect the 40-cent difference between the reimbursement of $3.01 for a free meal and $2.61 for a reduced-price meal.)

Changing the quality of the school lunch program began by eliminating sodas and transfats

The district's first step was to eliminate the sodas and foods with trans fats on the a la carte menu. At the time, it was a novel idea and met with resistance from some administrators partly because of the assumption that students would not buy the healthy food and the a la carte lunch program would lose more money than it was already losing. Others were concerned that children would simply skip lunch.

"Some of the principals asked 'what's wrong with kids having cookies?'" Woldow said. "They wanted the kids to eat lunch even if it meant corn dogs, French fries, and pizza." She doesn't encounter such resistance today. Since the public has become aware of the growing numbers of obese children, "we've gotten past that kind of mentality," she added.

Photo courtesy of San Francisco Unified School District

The favorite dish is still the "proverbial chicken nugget. It's made with breast meat, not the mystery meat that's usually used; it has whole grain crust—we managed to sneak that across; and it's never touched a frier."

—Student Nutrition Services Director Ed Wilkins

Woldow suggested, and the district agreed, to initiate a pilot project at Aptos Middle School in 2003. The school changed the food offered in the a la carte line that kids paid for, but not in the regular menu for those participating in the free or reduced-price meals program. Gone were hot dogs, gigantic cheeseburgers, huge pizzas, corn dogs, chicken nuggets, hot links, hot wings, soda, Gatorade, ice cream, and snack cakes that had been traditional fare in the a la carte lines.

In their place, the district offered deli sandwiches and introduced items such as vegetarian sushi, 100% fruit juice drinks, and bottled water.

The a la carte line at Aptos Middle had always lost money. But by the end of the first year with the healthier choices, the middle school had turned a small profit. The program was then implemented in every middle and high school in the district.

Although offerings in the a la carte menu were now healthier, the regular menu for the kids on free and reduced-price meals still relied heavily on items such as fried foods and canned fruit.

Wilkins then eliminated the fried foods from the main menu and, on most days, offered fresh fruit. In 2004, the district piloted a salad bar at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, a K–5 elementary school. By 2008, salad bars were in nearly all middle and high schools and about eight elementary schools. Packages of fresh vegetables are offered to children at schools without salad bars.

Today, in addition to the salad bars, there is a vegetarian entrée offered each day at all schools. Wilkins also provides an "international choice"—such as teriyaki chicken rice bowls with brown rice, or burritos with whole-grain tortillas—on the menu each day at middle and high schools. However, lunches can include pizza (only once a week), but it has whole-wheat crust and low-fat cheese and comes with a salad.

Still serving kids' food—but it's healthy

But the favorite dish is still the "proverbial chicken nugget," Wilkins said. "It's made with breast meat, not the mystery meat that's usually used; it has whole grain crust—we managed to sneak that across; and it's never touched a frier." It's baked.

"We haven't taken away what you would think of as kids' food," he said. "We've made kids' food healthy and introduced a variety of meals."

Patricia Gray, an assistant superintendent at San Francisco Unified, was principal at Balboa High School during this transition. She recalls having to deal with parents who complained that the school had no right to dictate what their children ate. She told parents if they wanted their children to bring such

Photo courtesy of San Francisco Unified School District

Director Ed Wilkins decided to eliminate the a la carte menu and create a card system that all students could use—those who paid for meals themselves and those receiving free and reduced-price meals. That way no one would know who was getting free meals and who was paying.

food in their lunches from home, that was fine; but the school would no longer offer unhealthy food through the a la carte program.

Many of the students "balked a little at first," she recalled, particularly about the loss of sodas. Then they started drinking the water and juices that were available.

"It snowballed and became the thing to do," she said. Their behavior in class was better, and the teachers commented about that. The students began to realize it too.

Gray thinks that eliminating the unhealthiest items and providing fresh fruit snacks contributed toward a reduction in referrals for discipline to her office by about half, particularly for "bad behavior after lunch." Before the changes in food were made, she added, the students "were either jumping around with too much energy or lethargic" and disinterested in learning.

Balboa was also the first school in the district to pilot a "Grab and Go" breakfast program that allowed kids to eat breakfast during the first 10 minutes of class. The goal was to increase the traditionally low participation in the free and reduced-price breakfast program. Through the "Grab and Go" program, students pick up a bag of breakfast items—such an orange and a breakfast burrito—in the cafeteria on their way to class. They are then allowed to eat it in the classroom. School officials have found that this approach greatly increases participation as students don't have to arrive earlier to school to benefit from the program.

Wilkins obtained a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture so the program could expand to include nine high schools and 10 middle schools.

Research by the Food Action and Research Center shows that students who participate in the federal free breakfast program have higher standardized test scores, fewer absences, reduced tardiness, improved attention, better behavior, and lower risks of obesity.

Social justice came into play

These changes went a long way toward making meals healthier for students, but the district still had a two-tiered system: an a la carte menu available only to kids who could pay, and the regular lunch line for everyone else. In 2009, Wilkins decided to eliminate the a la carte menu and create a card system that all students could use—those who paid for meals themselves and those receiving free and reduced-price meals. That way no one would know who was getting free meals and who was paying, removing the stigma some students felt being seen participating in the federally subsidized program, and increasing the likelihood that paying students would eat a healthier meal. Any student who used the card had to buy a complete meal, which includes fruit, vegetables, and milk.

Wilkins piloted the project in three schools and then implemented it district-wide in 2010–11. Now the only items left on the a la carte menu are bottled water, 100% fruit juice, and low-fat, lower-sugar cookies.

Photo courtesy of San Francisco Unified School District

By middle and high school, student worries about how they are perceived by their peers become a significant deterrent to participation in the lunch program.

"This was a social justice issue that we fixed," Wilkins said. "I consider this one of the most important changes that we did."

Woldow agrees. "When you're 8 years old, you don't think about it," she said. But by middle and high school, student worries about how they are perceived by their peers become a significant deterrent to participation in the lunch program.

Woldow says she would notice high school kids hanging out next to the food trucks outside schools because that was "cool," but they never bought anything to eat. As the result of a city ordinance approved in 2007, food vending trucks are now prohibited from coming within 1,500 feet (about three blocks) of the perimeter of public middle and high schools in San Francisco, though Supervisor Scott Wiener is currently trying to get the law changed to 500 feet (about one block). Negotiations are ongoing.

"Lunch time is a time to eat and relax—not worry about being cool," Woldow said. "But it is the most stressful time of the day for some kids."

A kitchen of one's own

One of the best ways to ensure healthy lunches is for the district to have trained staff cooking those meals in a central kitchen. But that is a huge investment, Wilkins said.

"There's not a real kitchen in most of our elementary schools," he said. Typically, nutrition services staff run a school's lunch program out of a tiny space with inadequate facilities. "I refer to it as operating out of a closet." It would be impossible to prepare food there, he said, so all food has to come pre-packaged and pre-cut. At the middle and high schools, there are still kitchens, but the equipment is old and some of it is dysfunctional, he added.

Besides that investment, the district would need more federal, state, or local funds for the school meals program to make the costs of distributing food and buying it from local vendors sustainable, Wilkins said.

"A lot of people insist you can do this within the bounds of the federal reimbursement rate," he said, adding that policymakers and the public need to understand that healthy food does not come cheaply.

Woldow agrees that more funding is needed. "I don't want you to get the idea that we've worked some kind of miracle here," she said. "All of these things come at a higher cost, and they contribute to the district's deficit. We're lucky we have a school board who supports this."

There are some changes that can be made, however, that don't cost any money. One way to help kids eat a better lunch is to have recess first, Woldow said. That way students aren't rushing to get through their meal so they can go outside and play. Another approach is for teachers to sometimes eat with the children.

"When my kids were at Aptos Middle School a decade ago, some of the 6th grade teachers used to eat lunch with their students pretty much every day," Woldow said. "It makes for a nicer experience for the students."

Despite budget constraints, Woldow still has her sights set high.

"I still nurture the dream that some day San Francisco Unified will build a central kitchen so that our school meals can be scratch cooked right here, using locally sourced ingredients, and delivered fresh to our students without ever being frozen," she said.

Woldow said the district could use money from a future facilities bond to build a kitchen, which would benefit not only the children, but also the city itself.

"The kitchen would provide well-paid cooking jobs for local residents, and could be headed by a graduate of one of the local culinary programs," she said. "Students at the high schools with culinary arts programs could work with mentors in the central kitchen to add a deeper dimension to their classroom studies."

Dana Woldow

To Learn More

Woldow's online site: Parents, Educators & Advocates Connection for Healthy School Food (PEACHSF).

School Breakfast Scorecard by the Food Research and Action Center.

What's Inside The 26-Ingredient School Lunch Burger by National Public Radio.

Supper is now on the menu at some California schools by EdSource.

Lunch Money: Serving Healthy School Food in a Sick Economy (2012) by Kate Adamick.

Lunch Wars: How To Start a School Food Revolution and Win the Battle for Our Children's Health (2011) by Amy Kalafa.

Fed Up with Lunch (2011) by Mrs. Q.

Free for All: Fixing School Food in America (2010) by Janet Poppendieck.

Lunch Lessons: Changing the Way We Feed Our Children (2006) by Ann Cooper.

Photo credit front page: (left and center photos) courtesy of San Francisco Unified School District; (right photo) courtesy of DC Central Kitchen