Minnesota Department of Education

TEAM NUTRITION Minnesota

Smarter Lunchroom Movement

Minnesota Success Stories

August 2015

The Smarter Lunchroom Movement

Background

School foodservice staff are faced with many challenges, such as keeping costs low and maintaining participation rates in their breakfast and lunch programs. Behavioral economic techniques, such as nudging students to make a healthier decision, may help increase sales and consumption of healthier food items.

The mission of the Smarter Lunchroom Movement is to create sustainable, low-cost, and evidence based changes to lunchrooms that promote and guide healthy eating behaviors among children. According the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (BEN Center), there are six principles based on research concerning various environmental cues that influence eating behavior. The basic principles include: 1) managing portion sizes 2) increasing convenience 3) improving visibility 4) enhancing taste expectations 5) utilizing suggestive selling and 6) setting smart pricing strategies.

The principles are further broken down into practical techniques that schools can use to encourage healthier eating. For example, making fruits and vegetables convenient, appealing, and available by displaying them pre-chopped and portioned, giving them fun and creative names, promoting them on menu boards, placing them at the start of service lines and the cash register, and making fruits and vegetables enticing on a salad bar. Many schools promote white milk in a more convenient and visible space in the cooler, while making chocolate milk and other sugary drinks less visible. A more appealing dining space can also help boost the sales of healthful foods, such as signage and posters, decorations from the students, and a board that displays daily or weekly menus. Further, involving students throughout the process from developing creative names to helping with promotional ideas is another way to employ Smarter Lunchroom principles.

For additional resources on the Smarter Lunchroom Movement visit: www.smarterlunchrooms.org.

Smarter Lunchrooms in Minnesota

During the 2014-2015 school year, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) trained over 300 school nutrition professionals on the topic of Smarter Lunchrooms as part of the USDA Team Nutrition grant. As a result, school districts have applied numerous Smarter Lunchroom techniques in their school cafeterias. The following five success stories, in random order, are a sample of the Smarter Lunchrooms projects being implemented in schools throughout Minnesota.

Kelliher Public Schools

Kelliher School is a PreK-12 public school in northern Minnesota serving a diverse student population of approximately 250 students. The school implemented a fruit and vegetable bar over the past year that resulted in some changes of how the lunchroom would operate. Administration was primarily concerned with the speed of the line, especially among the K-2 grades that would be switching to Offer Versus Serve (OVS). OVS allows students to decline some of the food offered in a reimbursable lunch or breakfast. The goals of OVS are to reduce food waste and to permit students to choose the foods they want to eat. Paraprofessionals also had concerns going into the transitions, specifically about service line speed with the increase in choices and food safety issues.

Changes and Results:
The fruit and vegetable bar was a resounding success. Since the staff was able to address existing hold-ups in the service line, they were able to serve the same number of students in the same — or even less— time. This was a huge success also considering that K-2 switched from serving all components to implementing offer versus serve during the transition. Younger students now have to make a number of choices every day about what fruits and vegetables they want and choosing at least two of the three other required meal components.

Kitchen staff have adjusted to the changes well and there has been no need to hire more staff. Paraprofessionals have been pleased by how smoothly the transition occurred and the fact that their original concerns have yet to be issues. A staff person recently asked the dietitian if the changes made at the school were part of a grant-funded program and if they were going to go away. The dietitian responded that the fruit and vegetable bar was here to stay. The staff member was so glad since she has seen the great benefit it is to the students. The most rewarding part of the change is the continued excitement the students demonstrate over their ability to make their own food choices, especially when it comes to fruits and vegetables. The staff has noticed a decrease in food waste and increased food consumption, especially with fruits and vegetables.

Techniques Used:

- Increasing the convenience of healthy foods.
- Promoting vegetables and salad bar options.
- Enhancing taste expectations.
- Giving kids a choice.

"As a nutritionist, it is exciting to see our students empowered to make their own food choices and to receive a greater variety of fresh fruits and vegetables every day. I believe that this really can be a grassroots movement in improving the health of our nation."

Techniques Used:

- Promoting white milk.
- Enhancing the lunchroom environment.
- Creating school synergies with signage, priming, and communication.
- Promoting fruits and vegetables.

Cafeteria bulletin board before changes

Cafeteria bulletin board after changes

Ely Independent School District

Ely ISD 696 has separate school buildings on its campus, one for the elementary school and another for the middle and high school. However, all students eat meals at the "Cafeteria 696" located in the middle and high school. In the fall of the 2014, the district implemented a salad bar for the students in grades 5-12. Students are able to select a reimbursable meal from the salad bar. Initially, staff served all salad bar items to students.

Changes and Results:
In an effort to encourage students to choose healthier options, skim and one percent milk were placed at the front of the other milk options and chocolate-flavored milk was moved further out of reach. Additionally, snack items were repositioned in the cafeteria in a less prominent position. The salad bar station was moved so it would be the first thing the students encounter as they enter the cafeteria. Students are now able to self-serve vegetables and fruits from the salad bar.

A menu board was placed in the hallway entrance to "Cafeteria 696", as well as at the front of the serving line. Fun and descriptive names have been given to majority of the fruits and vegetables on the menu. Laminated cards with vegetable names are placed near the specific vegetable on the serving line to help students identify the items. Framed posters of healthy foods have been placed on cafeteria walls. A high school art class has made a decorative signs for the cafeteria and there are plans for the class to produce more art for the cafeteria.

The staff also looked for ways to make the cafeteria more inviting by removing unnecessary clutter. A "catch-all" bookshelf was removed from the entrance to the cafeteria, and new and more attractive garbage cans were purchased and placed near the dish room.

Overall, many efforts were made to encourage students to participate in the school breakfast and lunch programs and choose healthier options. The school district plans to continue to improve their programs to keep students participating for years to come!

Bemidji Area Schools

The Smarter Lunchroom training offered through MDE allowed two cook managers and a food service director in the Bemidji school district the opportunity to evaluate their existing food service programs, as well as set realistic goals that their staff could use in their own operations. All of the Bemidji public schools took the Smarter Lunchroom Self-Assessment to assess their current use of the principles and to determine which steps could be taken to improve the school lunch programs.

Changes and Results:
Two of the district schools started having a University of Minnesota nutrition educator in the lunchroom once per month to provide nutrition education related to the foods being served that day. The education component has helped increase the student's consumption of fruits and veggies at these two schools.

Signage has also improved and is being changed at least quarterly. Theme days, such as "Taco Tuesday" have been added to the schedule. Fruit available near the register makes it easier for students to grab items to fulfill their requirements for meals.

Sample trays of breakfast and lunch meals were also new additions to the lunchroom. Additionally, there is a sign at the register that says what will be served for breakfast the next day. The signs get the kids talking about breakfast, and the food manager believes it has helped increase school breakfast participation. As a result of many of the changes the food service staff has made, the kids seem more willing to try different kinds of vegetables.

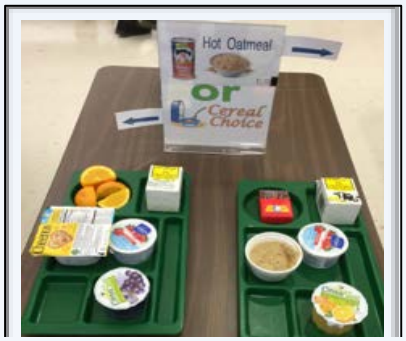
With the help of the art teacher, children were able to decorate the cafeteria with their artwork (e.g. lots of snowflakes during winter) and the children loved helping with the project. Each cafeteria is also being given a name that corresponds to the individual school, such as the "All Star Diner." The Bemidji staff plans to continue making subtle changes to enhance the food service programs at each site.

Techniques Used:

- Improving the lunchroom atmosphere.
- Creating school synergies with signage, priming, and communication.
- Recognition and support of school food.
- Promoting the entrée of the day.
- Increasing sales of reimbursable meals.

"Overall we are fortunate, because staff already is doing excellent work at their sites to promote the meal programs."

Displays of healthy lunch meals in the school



Techniques Used:

- Promoting vegetables.
- Enhancing taste expectations.
- Recognition and support with Fuel Up to Play 60 program and dietetic interns.
- Student involvement.

"The more students are involved in the process, the better acceptance of new menu options. The students loved the taste testing and knowing that the options that they choose appeared on the menu."

Vegetable chips for sampling

Rochester Public Schools

Rochester Public Schools has a community partnership with the Mayo Clinic Dietetic Internship Program. This relationship allows creative young minds to help the school implement and test new ideas. Additionally, the Fuel Up to Play 60 Team (an in-school nutrition and physical activity program) at one of the schools was able to participate in taste testing days.

Changes and Results:

Some of the taste tests were geared towards fruit and vegetable recipes, while others were samples of new breakfast items. One of the dietetic interns made baked Rainbow Chips using yucca root, taro root, purple potatoes, sweet potatoes, and beets. The kitchen staff ran-out of the chips after the first two runs! During the lunch periods, the dietetic intern went throughout the lunchroom and asked students for feedback about the chips. The staff also showed the students what a yucca and taro root looked like; the students really seemed to enjoy that. The students reported that they liked them and most finished their samples.

At Rochester Alternative School, whole grain breakfast items were tested. Following student input, two of the sample items were placed on the menu for March and April. Breakfast participation started increasing in March.

The students loved the taste testing and seeing their feedback drive the new menus. They also understood when gathering input that there is a clear end-result of how the feedback will be used.

Red Lake School District

A new high school and middle school cafeteria is currently being designed for the Red Lake School District, which will provide changes to the lunchroom services. Student council members are providing input on the planning and designing of the new cafeteria. Recently, four students came to the kitchen staff asking questions about the menu. The kitchen staff asked the students to put together a survey to ask the high school and middle school students' questions regarding the breakfast and lunch menus.

Changes and Results:

The four students constructed the survey and distributed it to their peers, so it was a "kids surveying kids" project. Students were asked about what their favorite and least favorite menu items were. The staff found this to be a really great way to get the students involved with the school lunch program, and they hope to use some of the suggestions to improve student satisfaction. In addition to the student survey, Red Lake has involved the student council in the planning process for the new cafeteria. Based on some of the student suggestions, more variety will be added to the new cafeteria.

The school staff found that the salad bar is also popular among the students. The salad bar is available to students K-12 and is placed in front of the hot entrée service line. The salad bar has its own menu, and students are able to make a reimbursable meal at the salad bar with the fruit, vegetable, protein, and grain options. Staff notes that kids are taking a couple of fruits and vegetables in addition to everything else and that there has been low food waste; staff are shocked by this! Some of the paraprofessionals have been making rainbows on the children's plates using the colored vegetables. To continue encouraging the vegetables, the kitchen staff plans to put up signs that say, "Taste the Rainbow." Summer will allow for more time to make changes throughout the lunchroom space, such as adding new posters and planning to implement some of the students' suggestions.

Techniques Used:

- Student involvement.
- Promoting vegetables and salad bar options.
- Increasing sales of reimbursable meals.

Student meal with vegetables from the salad bar