

## August 28, 2012

## Note to Parents, Educators, Nurses, School Administrators and Community Members

You're starving our kids!

The football players are not going to get the calories they need.

I'm paying higher prices for my child's meal, and they're getting less food!

These are some of the comments that we've been hearing from parents or other community members over the past few weeks. School lunch is an emotional issue – and that is, in part, because we have done a great job of nurturing each child who comes through our lunch line! We care about our kids, and we prepare our meals with love! If we're guilty of anything, it's going above and beyond. But that "above and beyond" also means we've probably been serving our kids a little more food than they actually need to grow, thrive and learn.

Nutritional guidelines for the school lunch program have been in place for almost 70 years — relying on the latest scientific research and response to the demographics of our children. Right now we are fighting a battle on two fronts — childhood obesity and under-nourishment related to specific vitamins and nutrients found most commonly in fruits and vegetables and under-nourishment for those kids that don't have access to regular meals every day. Research shows that very few children and adolescents consume the recommended amount of vegetables, especially those that are dark green, orange, red and dry beans and peas. These vegetables contain key nutrients that can prevent many diseases later on in life. The new federal nutrition standards for school meals ensure that meals are healthy, well-balanced and provide students the nutrition they need to succeed at school. School meals offer students milk, fruits and vegetables, proteins and grains, while controlling fat, trans fat and portion size.

Starting this school year, students will actually be receiving *larger* servings of vegetables and fruits, a wider variety of vegetables, and more whole grain-rich products. I think part of the problem may be that many children and adolescents may not be familiar with a variety of fruits and vegetables and have relied on grains and meat/meat alternates to provide the bulk of calories for the day. The new meal patterns do not exclude grains and meats; however the portion size is limited, thus reducing the sodium and saturated fats that are often found in convenience entrée products. This is the change that students will notice most. In actuality, the new menu requirements this year provides the same recommended amount of calories as last year – but the calories will be shifted from grains and higher calorie entrée items to a wider variety of fruits and vegetables.

The goal of the National School Lunch Program is to not only provide healthy meals, but to use the meals as a way of teaching students what a balanced meal looks like in order to instill lifelong healthy eating habits. A typical school lunch will provide about one- third of the daily nutrient needs of a student, which includes 24 key nutrients that children need for growth and development. If a student is physically active or participates in sports, he or she may need additional calories supplemented from another source. If students are feeling hungry after eating a school lunch, we need to consider that they may be "choosing" to go hungry rather than

make their food item selections from the bounty of fruits and vegetables that will be offered this school year.

We want our children to live a long and productive life – to live as long as adults today will. The goal of the HHFKA legislation is "to ensure that more children from all income levels adopt the kind of healthful eating habits and lifestyles that will enable them to live longer, more productive lives." And who can argue with that!

Brenda Braulick, the food service director for Sartell schools summed it up succinctly with these words: "We're not going to change our food choices overnight. But by changing what we serve the kids, we'll help them make better decisions and lifestyle changes for the future."

If a parent, school administrator, teacher or other community member has concerns, you will want to share this information with them. This is indeed a big societal change for all of us – we are more accustomed to "super-sizing" than we are to paying attention to recommended portion sizes. Change means progress, but change also brings anxiety. If your school and community partners still want to voice their concerns, invite them to participate in the school district Local Wellness Policy Committee. You might recommend that they contact their U.S. senators and members of congress who represent them. The state Department of Education can't change the federal law, only the senators and representatives that we elected can do that. But I hope that you'll help to spread the message that it's important that we try to do our best for our children. Get the message out to the teachers and nurses in your school as they will be helpful advocates.

We are part of an opportunity to help impact and improve the nutritional health of 32 million children across the U.S. each school day. Improving the nutrition of school meals is an important investment in the future of America's children.

Best Regards -

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