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Nutrition for Health



MARKETING SELLS MEALS! SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Karen Weber Cullen, DrPH, RD
Associate Professor of Pediatrics-Nutrition
Children's Nutrition Research Center
Baylor College of Medicine

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During the 2006-07 school year, about 30 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and about 59% received free or reduced price lunches. However, student, staff, and parents frequently voice complaints about school meals. Less nutritious competitive foods often are selected instead of NSLP meals. Children who are eligible for free or reduced price meals do not participate because of the stigma attached to receiving such meals.

What can schools do to improve their school meal programs while staying within the USDA and Dietary Guidelines framework of an entree, two servings of fruit and/or vegetables, a grain product, and 8 ounces of milk? Good marketing with a focus on product, price, placement, and promotion can help.

- First, look at product and price. Many school menus offer a choice of items, often several entrees and fruit and vegetable choices for each lunch meal.
 - o Ask students and staff to suggest entrees and options that they would like to eat.
 - o Over the course of each week, strive for variety every day, balance high and low fat items, and include both fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables.
 - o Try to create highly attractive NSLP meals that deliver on taste and continue to be the best bargain in the cafeteria.
- Placement and promotion work together.
 - o Menu items should be attractively displayed. Food presentation is important to students, and students report selecting and eating foods they like that look good and are easy to eat. This may mean experimenting with preparation strategies like pre-slicing fruit and vegetables.
 - o Clean and inviting cafeterias, as well as pleasant cafeteria serving staff and adequate meal service periods, will enhance participation.
 - o Try making new food items available for taste testing to increase acceptance.
 - o Give teachers and parents free NSLP meal vouchers to introduce them to school meals and enlist their support.

It is important to model practices that restaurants use to attract and maintain customers. Healthy meals can be attractive and taste great!

Dr. Cullen is an expert in health promotion and education, specifically student lunch selection and food sales in schools. She currently is evaluating the effect of Texas school food policy changes on food selection in middle schools.

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100 Hillside Avenue, 3rd Fl, White Plains, NY 10603-2863
Tel: 914-872-8543*

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