

A Few New Things on Their Plates

By Jennifer Quigley Harris

When students at Jenks Junior High School file into the cafeteria for lunch, their menu choices sound a bit more like lunch entrees at your favorite cafe than offerings of a school cafeteria. Turkey-cranberry wraps, chicken and broccoli calzones, garden salads made to order. There's fresh fruit every day, some of it from local farms. Items for sale in the vending machines and snack bars have changed as well. Candy bars, soda and popsicles have been replaced by rice cakes, graham crackers, and yogurt. Students won't find soda or artificially sweetened drinks anywhere at this school. Instead they can gulp down a carton of low fat milk, a box of 100% juice or a bottle of plain old water.

This middle school lunchroom isn't a part of Alice Waters' efforts in the Berkeley, CA school district, and it isn't one of the schools under the kitchen direction of Jamie Oliver, the celebrity chef changing the face of school lunches in Britain. This school is in Pawtucket, RI, an urban school district right in the middle of New England. And, thanks to the dedicated efforts of a group of Rhode Island residents, students in the Pawtucket public schools eat only healthy and highly nutritious foods during their school day.

What happened in Pawtucket school lunchrooms was the result of teamwork between the members of the Pawtucket school district, the employees at the corporate food service company Sodexo, and the leadership of Kids First, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the nutritional and physical well being of children. The conversion to all healthy foods, first at Jenks and then eventually to the rest of the district, was just one of the milestones reached during a three year project funded by the Rhode Island Foundation to change school meals and food vending for the better in Pawtucket schools. The project - *Transforming School Nutrition: Better Meals for Pawtucket Students* - set out to improve student health by improving school food. As it progressed, the *Transforming School Nutrition* project directly affected statewide school food legislation, expanded the corporate channels of food distribution within Rhode Island schools and helped to generate a comprehensive set of nutritional guidelines and criteria for all food products consumed by Rhode Island schoolchildren.

At its conclusion, the project went beyond the implementation of healthier school food in Pawtucket. After three active years, it provides a wealth of practical information, tested strategies, and a series of positive partnerships statewide, that other school districts can model so that every Rhode Island community has the chance to improve student health by serving fresh and healthy foods to the students in their schools.

Partnering with the School Community

When national news headlines reported that the number of obese children in America doubled over the past twenty years, parents, educators and health professionals scrambled to find ways to address the alarming statistics. In June of 2005, the RI General Assembly passed a state law requiring Rhode Island school districts to actively address the health of their students by establishing wellness committees. The state law expanded upon the recently passed Federal law that required schools to develop wellness policy to improve the health of their students. The RI law took the Federal law one step further - it added a "people factor" to the development of wellness policy. The goal of the RI law was to ensure a deeper accountability to wellness policy formed within a school district as mandated by federal law. By authorizing a wellness committee in each district to implement policies they created, local leadership would be directly responsible for improving student health in its own district. In addition, RI wellness committees had to report back jointly to the State Departments of Health and Education indicating how their specific district's wellness plans would improve student health.

Pawtucket already had an active school wellness group in place before state law mandated the creation of one. The Eat Healthy-Get Active Team of staff, parents, students, district officials and school committee members at Jenks Junior High School had been working together since 2000 to help influence positive practices regarding nutrition, physical activity and food safety at that school. The Eat Healthy-Get Active Team at Jenks grew out of prior Kids First project, funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, to address food safety and nutrition awareness. To adhere to the new state requirements, the Pawtucket school district would have to expand the group formed at Jenks to develop wellness policy and action across the entire school district.

For Kids First, the passage of the wellness subcommittee law helped focus attention on goals and timelines as they embarked on the first year of their *Transforming School Nutrition* project. One of the first steps was to build community support to propel the project forward, initially as a pilot program at Jenks, and then eventually, as an all-district policy.

Acting as facilitators, Kids First encouraged the Jenks Eat Healthy-Get Active Team to focus on two objectives. One, officially form the required district wellness committee (as the Pawtucket District Committee on Nutrition and Physical Activity), and two, establish Jenks as the primary test site for rolling out the comprehensive *Transforming School Nutrition* project. Guidelines to help the wellness committee formally address and report on health and wellness issues in the Pawtucket district were written. Nutrition criteria was drafted for the Jenks pilot program. Parents and school staff were recruited to get on board with the proposed changes to the foods served at school. Movie nights, health fairs, and fundraisers were all used as ways to reach out and educate the Jenks school community on the importance of good nutrition.

In all, Kids First ran over five hundred nutrition education workshops and programs throughout the district to engage staff, parents, administrators and students. For the Kids First team, preparing and educating the Jenks school community as well as the entire district for food changes was essential groundwork for success.

Partnering with a Food Service Provider

Although some school districts in Rhode Island do self-operate their own cafeterias, the majority (83%) sign contracts with large corporate food service management companies like Aramark, Chartwell's and Sodexo. When the *Transforming School Nutrition* project was launched, Sodexo was the food service management company for Pawtucket. Although Sodexo had a five year contract in place with the Pawtucket schools, the management team welcomed the chance to work alongside Kids First to improve the nutritious aspects of the foods they served. As a corporation, Sodexo was well aware of the news headlines about healthy eating nationwide and they were making progress internally to address school food nutrition. They knew that to better the health of the Rhode Island students they served, a full scale community commitment to the marketing, sales and education about healthier eating was needed at all levels.

“The only way to successfully have healthier food options succeed in a school environment is if there is an all-school approach,” says Solange Morrissette, Sodexo General Manager for the Pawtucket school district when the Kids First *Transforming School Nutrition* project went into action. She currently oversees two additional school district meal programs statewide. She believes that the success in Pawtucket's food changes came about because of the widespread education about healthy eating that occurred. “It takes a full school commitment,” she said. “You can't just have a healthy lunch line or sell healthy snacks and then have an ice-cream party in the classroom after lunch. That just gives mixed messages to the kids.”

Healthier Snacks

One of the first steps to improve nutrition at Jenks was to build on a contractual request made by the Pawtucket School Committee to Sodexo to improve the healthful nature of vending machine items. Like many other schools across the country, the Pawtucket school district has food vending machines and a la carte snack bars in place along with the actual meals (breakfast and lunch) that are served.

The federal government reimburses for meals served under the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program. To receive these reimbursements, schools must serve meals that meet (or exceed) the Department of Agriculture nutritional standards. While the USDA standards encourage a nutritional balance and awareness of age-appropriate

caloric intake, there are school nutrition advocates who don't believe the USDA Guidelines reflect enough about the current research concerning children's growing and developing bodies. There is a belief that the USDA Guidelines don't fully address the increased need for more whole foods and fresh produce to improve children's health.

Of course, there is also an economical aspect to school vending and snacks. In a 2003 study by the General Accounting Office, the federal school meal reimbursements were found overall not to have kept up with school-meal program expenditures such as the rising cost of labor. As a result of cash flow shortfalls, many school districts use vending machines and a la carte snack items to boost revenues. Vending and snack products save a school district money because they require no labor costs to prepare them (just unpack and stack). Since they are outside the realm of the breakfast and lunch meal program, snacks and vending items are not held to any kind of meaningful federal nutritional standard (USDA or otherwise). Combining prepackaged foods with no nutritional guidelines often results in items like chips, candy, and ice cream being offered alongside (and often in direct competition with) school meals. Without enforced wellness policies and child centered education about healthy food choices, many kids will up making poor food choices at mealtime.

Like in other school districts nationwide, Pawtucket's snack (a la carte) and vending machine items for sale in 2005 contained items like M&Ms, Doritos, and Gatorade. One of the first actions during the *Transforming School Nutrition* project was identifying alternate food products available through Sodexo's current list of vendors. Using nutritional guidelines developed by Kids First, lists of products from Sodexo's vendors were researched to determine if they were "healthy" items. The nutritional guidelines used in the Pawtucket project served as the basis for the 2006-2007 Rhode Island state laws regarding approved vending machine products.

Besides improving the quality of foods ordered through established vendors, the *Transforming School Nutrition* project sought to expand the Sodexo vendor base to include more companies that carried minimally processed foods and a wider base of fresh produce. To help identify and market these vendors, Kids First established The Healthy Foods Marketplace, a trade show specifically for healthy snack vendors. The Healthy Foods Marketplace enables vendors to provide information to school districts and food service providers on what kind of healthy food options are available for purchase. The Marketplace continues to attract over 50 vendors a year, all eager to feature their products to communities demanding healthier foods. (The 2008 Healthy Foods Marketplace will take place August 14, 10:00 am to 3:00 p.m., at The Crowne Plaza in Warwick.)

Once healthier items were purchased through Sodexo's vendor channels, Little Debbie's, Starbursts and Skittles were replaced by lower fat, lower sugar snacks such as animal crackers, Goldfish, and baked chips. But the first few weeks Pawtucket schools offered healthier snack and vending items, sales did not look good.

“The mistake was changing the snack bar outright,” said Morrissette of Sodexo. “Although we tried to educate the kids about healthier choices, once the foods they were used to disappeared, their heads were spinning.”

Daren Bulley, Kids First Program Coordinator for the Transforming *School Food*, agreed.

“When the a la carte line went over to all healthy items, there was a sign announcing ‘Welcome to your new all healthy snack bar!’. Menu items were listed as ‘low fat’ or ‘no added sugars’,” said Bulley. “And sales plummeted.”

So the signs came down and new point of sale materials for items featured in the snack bar went up. Items that were not selling were replaced. Vendors and Kids First staff organized tasting sessions with students. There was additional promotion and an increase in the educational outreach about healthy eating. Snack sales eventually recovered and, today, are at about the same level at Jenks than they were before the changes took place.

Healthier Meals

The next step in the project was to change breakfast and lunch menus by adding one and a half times more fresh fruit, vegetables and whole grains than the previous school year. There would be no added sweeteners in drinks and all milk would be low-fat. As with the vending and a la carte foods, Kids First developed Nutritional Guidelines that met and exceeded the USDA nutritional guidelines for reimbursable school meals. As with the vending and snack foods, Kids First and Sodexo partnered together to have tasting sessions and distribute promotional materials during *Transforming School Nutrition* to encourage students and staff to embrace the food changes. When the breakfasts and lunches at Jenks first changed, kids were skeptical.

“Students kept asking, ‘Where are the nachos?’,” says Sodexo’s Morrissette. She encouraged Sodexo staff to explain why nachos disappeared from the lunch menu. “We’d tell them how nachos were bad for you and that they needed to eat more nutritiously.”

Marketing efforts ramped up again. June 6 was designated "All Healthy Food Day". The entire Jenks community was prepped ahead of time that only healthy food options would be available. The lunch menu was promoted heavily ahead of time and meal participation increased.

Kids First Daren Bulley helped serve lunches on “All Healthy Food Day”. “The menu items were well presented and we did not say ‘This is low fat’ or ‘There is no sugar in

this’,” he recalls. “The students noticed the new look of the meals, all the vegetable offerings and the whole grains, and they ate it up.”

Over the next year, Sodexo continued to find unique ways to encourage healthy eating as the Jenks pilot rolled out to the other schools in the district. By randomly showing up during the lunch hour with a camera, Sodexo workers try to “catch” kids who are eating healthy foods. Photos of students hamming it up for the camera while eating vegetables, fruits and whole grain breads and pizzas are put on display and the students receive a reward ribbon congratulating them on their food choice.

Sodexo’s Morrissette believes in good food presentation. “You eat with your eyes,” she says. In elementary schools, effective food presentation can be as simple as using color. In Pawtucket’s elementary schools, certain weeks contain “Color My World” lunch menus. Every day is represented by a different color and the new food for that day matches the day’s color. So if Friday is a Red Day, red foods like cherry tomatoes, radishes and red peppers are featured in the lunch menu and kids are encouraged to try a new red food.

In the middle and high schools, healthier lunch menus are enhanced with showy food presentations such as “Display Cooking” days. Mexican Fiesta lunches with fajitas, rice, beans and toppings or Chinese New Year lunches with meat, rice and veggies, all cooked to order, give students the chance to see their lunches prepared right in front of them. “Display Cooking” days help to emphasize the idea that meals are an enjoyable and social aspect of life. The presentations also teach kids about the skill of meal preparation and food variations in other world cultures.

While working with Kids First in Pawtucket, Sodexo encouraged their frontline staff to learn about serving and preparing healthier foods. Workshop sessions for Sodexo staff included such topics as “Cooking with Whole Grains” and “Putting More Fruits and Veggies on the Menu”. Food service workers were encouraged to participate in various wellness education classes and healthy activities like yoga and dancing. A Wellness Fair featuring examples of healthy breakfast foods sent the message that healthy food eating was something everyone in the school community could appreciate - not just the kids.

Food presentation has been a key element in the food changes. When the Pawtucket project started, school kitchens had been outfitted with special ovens, freezers and refrigerators so that most food could be prepared on site and as near to serving time as possible. Simple steps were taken to ensure that the food, when it arrived before student’s eyes, was as appealing as it could be. For example, sandwiches and hamburgers were served open faced with lettuce and tomato on one side. This simple change ensured that veggies no longer ended up as a wilted mess because they had been prepared two hours earlier, tightly wrapped in foil, and placed in hot holding equipment.

Farm-to-School

While the Nutritional Guidelines developed during *Transforming School Nutrition* (A La Carte/Vending Guidelines and RINR 2009) helped to define and identify many types of “healthy foods” for Rhode Island school districts, there’s never been any doubt that the healthiest and freshest food available is local produce. However, the common (and mistaken) assumption is that local Rhode Island agriculture cannot sustain entire school systems and that getting local produce into the schools is prohibitively expensive. The *Transforming School Nutrition* project set out to correct these misconceptions. As part of the project, Kids First was committed to finding farms that could affordably provide both adequate volume and fresh quality produce to school food programs. Kids First believed that even incremental increases in the quantities of local produce would significantly contribute to more nutritious school food. They also saw it as a fantastic educational opportunity to help connect kids more fully with where food comes from and how it is grown at the local level.

The first barrier was that Sodexo’s purchasing policies did not accommodate direct buys from local growers. As it did with vending food and snacks, the *Transforming School Nutrition* project helped to open up the distribution channels within Sodexo so that local farms could provide fruits and vegetables to local schools.

“During the *Transforming School Nutrition* project, we had to tackle the [distribution] issue at the Sodexo corporate level in order to open up the farm-to-school floodgate for all Sodexo districts in Rhode Island,” says Dorothy Brayley, Executive Director of Kids First. “We made huge progress! It took three years, but we believe we’ve found the sustainable model. Farmers negotiate directly with Sodexo, and then a middle man distributor - Community Fruitland - provides pickup, deliveries, and the quality assurances that Sodexo needs. To me, this is the best form of sustainability. A sustainable business model.”

Apples, potatoes and butternut squash grown on Rhode Island farms have been served in Sodexo schools statewide since the *Transforming School Nutrition* project took effect. Thousands of pounds of local potatoes will be offered in Sodexo districts in the fall. As with the snacks and vending, the Kids First team worked with Sodexo to help food service workers learn how to cut, cook and serve the fresh produce. These “Chef Assistance” services from Kids First are essential tools in helping students and staff adapt to school food changes. And that, according to Solange Morrissette of Sodexo, is part of what made the entire *Transforming School Nutrition* project successful.

“Kids First really took on the role of change agent,” said Morrissette. “That was essential for both serving the healthier food and giving nutritional instruction at all levels.

Rhode Island is one of the more progressive states in terms of criteria for healthier foods in its schools. And Kids First is to thank for that.”

The End of the Project, The Start of State Wide Change

During the three years of the *Transforming School Nutrition* project, additional state laws addressing Rhode Island school nutrition passed and went into effect. The comprehensive vending, snack and a la carte state laws passed in 2006 and 2007 set strict criteria to define what “healthy” snacks or drinks are and then require that only those products that meet the healthy criteria can be sold during the school day outside of meals. As the *Transforming School Nutrition* project progressed from an improvement of food options in one district into a living case study of what could be accomplished in any school, it helped to provide valuable information for the development of statewide action.

“Sometimes you have to be in the middle of something to know you have an opportunity,” said Dorothy Brayley of Kids First. “The project in Pawtucket helped to inform us of what would actually work in the schools - what foods were being served, how we could get access to better foods and how we could develop a relationship with a major food service corporation to educate the kids and the community about healthier food choices. The bottom line was always trying to find what out was best for the kids.”

There is hope that the food transformation that took place in the Pawtucket schools will reach beyond the end date of the project. Since improving snacks and vending systems in Pawtucket schools ultimately improved snack and vending systems statewide, there’s an opportunity for parallel positive outcomes for school breakfasts and lunches statewide. The nutritional requirements for school meals developed by the RI Department of Education with Kids First (RINR 2009) are currently being piloted at schools throughout the state, through a Rhode Island Department of Education USDA Team Nutrition grant. These test drives could help to propel the adoption of statewide meal nutrition criteria, especially as the Governor’s plan for one contracted food service company to run all RI school districts goes into effect for the 2008-2009 school year.

There are still lessons to be learned and shared across the state in terms of addressing the remaining complications and barriers involved with distribution, purchasing and serving of healthier foods in schools. Federal issues like the farm commodities program and the reimbursable meal program need to be updated so that getting healthier foods into the established system is not as cost-prohibitive. As part of their ongoing effort to educate, encourage and promote nutrition awareness in all Rhode Island schools and communities, Kids First hopes to model and build upon the successes they had in the Pawtucket school system. Ultimately, they’d like to help every other school district in the state put healthy, fresh and delicious foods on the plates of Rhode Island school children every day.