

Some schools want lunches healthier than national standards

National standards for school-lunch nutrition are getting more stringent, but some local schools are pushing for even healthier – and tastier – options

By John-John Williams IV, The Baltimore Sun

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Brad Herling received a surprisingly warm reaction several years ago when he banned cupcakes and candy during holiday parties in the name of health at **Clarksville** Elementary School in Howard County.

He's being welcomed with equally open arms this school year as he prepares to lead Centennial Lane Elementary School in the same direction. Parents at his new school have been waging their own war on **childhood obesity** with a campaign to limit the number of sweet and high-fat snacks served during lunch.

"It will be a perfect match," said Megan Roth, president of the Centennial Lane **PTA**. "We are a school that is going that way. We already had very few parties where kids brought snacks in. Our community has strong feelings about getting our kids healthier."

At a time when the nation's schools have adopted the strictest health standards in history, some school systems and nutrition groups have asked for and have achieved more stringent restrictions.

Some like Centennial Lane Elementary in **Ellicott City** have introduced more healthful snacks to students instead of the sweets and other treats. Baltimore City has adopted "Meatless Mondays" and has shifted to an effort to serve locally grown organic food. In Baltimore County, a parent group is pushing for more healthful foods. And nationally, the country's first lady is leading an effort to get children to eat more fruits, vegetables and low-fat foods.

The efforts make sense to Herling, who has worked for the Howard County school system for 35 years. At Clarksville Elementary, Herling limited the cupcakes and fatty foods during the holidays and encouraged parents to send their children to class parties with offerings of fresh vegetables, fruits, 100 percent fruit juices, and cheese and crackers.

"You can't do enough about this," Herling said. "It is a big problem. The kids need direction. The parents are looking for directions from the schools."

The nation is one step closer to offering more healthful foods to the 31 million children who participate in the National School Lunch Program. Last week, the Senate unanimously approved \$4.5 billion legislation that would create new standards for all foods in schools, including items in vending machines. Under the bill, schools would serve pizza using whole-wheat crust and low-fat mozzarella, and vending machines would be stocked with less candy and high-calorie sodas.

The legislation also expands the number of low-income children eligible for free or reduced meals. A similar bill is pending in the House. The standards coincide with stricter U.S. Department of Agriculture standards that would increase the amount of fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains served during school lunch while decreasing the amount of sodium and saturated fat.

"This takes a huge step forward," said Arianne Corbett, nutrition policy associate for the Center for Science and the Public Interest, a Washington-based nonprofit group. "This will provide training and education. In order to get money from the federal government, school systems will have to meet these standards."

These efforts also coincide with first lady **Michelle Obama's** Let's Move! program, which encourages children to be physically active and eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lower-fat foods.

Corbett lauds efforts in Maryland to serve more healthful food in school as some of the best in the nation. More than 72 million lunches are served in Maryland public schools each year, according to Maryland State Department of Education data.

Since Tony Geraci, director of food and nutrition services for Baltimore schools, took the job two years ago, he has pushed to offer organic, locally grown foods in city schools and launched "Meatless Mondays," which encourages students to include more fruit and vegetables in their diets by skipping meat at least once a week. Geraci also hopes to convert a former Pulaski Highway warehouse into a 37,000-square-foot central kitchen where cooks can prepare local foods and then ship them to school cafeterias for final heating and assembly. The project is expected to cost \$3 million.

"It has taken a lot of pushing and a lot of shoving," said Geraci, who will be touring a kitchen in Montgomery County this week for ideas for his central kitchen. "But now we are at a place where we have figured out creative funding to make this thing happen."

Howard County has among the nation's strictest guidelines when it comes to school nutrition. In 2006, the school board approved a food and wellness policy that eliminated the sale and distribution of food and beverages deemed to be of minimal nutritional value during the school day. It also prohibited the sale of soda at the primary-grade level and limited the amount of soda sold in vending machines at secondary schools.

The efforts in Howard County did not stop there.

When students complained about the taste of some of the more healthful new options in the cafeteria, school officials initiated a recipe contest, with the winning entree to be added to menus throughout the school system.

The winning team, from Atholton High School in Columbia, created a more healthful version of a spicy buffalo

chicken wrap. While the original recipe calls for a deep-fried, breaded chicken breast doused in a mixture of butter and hot sauce with blue cheese, the new version uses oven-baked chicken, a whole-wheat tortilla, light ranch dressing, a sparse amount of cheddar cheese and lemon juice to cool the spicy hot sauce.

The Howard school system will also use student feedback from an annual tasting of prospective food items in making menu decisions. At the January taste-testing of 66 dishes at Howard High School, 12 students sampled items including fruit smoothies and teriyaki chicken. Students' feedback will factor into the decision on what food is purchased for the coming school year, according to school officials.

At Herling's new school, Centennial Lane, the PTA initiated a pilot two years ago to replace about 10 different snacks that the school served during lunch. Many of the replacement snacks were not only low in fat and sugar, but also free of additives and preservatives. The school offered free taste tests to the students to sell them on the newer, less-known items, which included cookies, fruit roll-up snacks and yogurt without preservatives and coloring.

"I think that there is still room for improvement," the PTA's Roth said of the school food offerings in general. "The general feeling is that they can still be healthier than they really are. The county guidelines and the state have done a fair job as far as trying to limit sugar and fat. There are still preservatives and additives. In talking to parents, that is still a big concern."

In Baltimore County, a growing number of parents have joined **Baltimore County Healthy Kids Coalition**, a group of 100 people who want their school system to serve fewer processed foods and more locally grown fruits and vegetables.

The group, which formed at the end of last school year, has been working with the school system's director of food and nutrition services to gain a better understanding of the workings of that department so that it can offer suggestions to improve the daily food offerings. In addition, the group wants to increase students' knowledge of how food is grown and produced.

"It just doesn't make sense for us to come up with the perfect lunch if we haven't educated ourselves as to their process," said Kris Henry, co-founder of the group. "We are looking at small steps. Everyone can agree that we want to get fewer processed food and more fruits and veggies."

Henry added: "School is a place where kids are learning all the time. They shouldn't have to put on blinders when they walk into the cafeteria. That should also be a place where they learn healthy habits."

Henry stressed that her organization wants to work with the school system as a partner, not as an adversary.

"She's [Karen Levenstein, head of food and nutrition services] got to serve food that the kids like and that parents won't complain about," Henry said. "She's got a lot on her plate. We want to work with her, given all the constraints she has."

In Baltimore City, Geraci is still miffed when he hears the gripes about school lunch programs, especially in his school system.

"My only response is that you should come and see for yourself," he said. "It is this collective: school lunch bashing. Honestly, child nutrition professionals work harder to provide good food for kids than any other business. But we get bashed. If all I served was chicken nuggets, something fried, no salad and no fruit, I would be out of a job."

Corbett, with the Center for Science and the Public Interest, thinks that it will be impossible to please everyone.

"Parents are not always the most realistic as to what the school system can do," she said. "They would be surprised by other districts around the country that are not as progressive."

Without parents, it is unlikely that stricter standards in school cafeterias — like the ones in the pending legislation — would take place.

"The movement of parents to question what their children have been fed has caused a lot of positive results around the country," Corbett said. "If we didn't have parents lobbying for policy, we wouldn't be where we are today."

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