

Menu Changes

Last year, the USDA announced new rules for healthier school lunches. Some changes have gone down more easily than others.

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By TFK Staff

In September, nearly 32 million kids across the country saw big changes on their school-lunch trays. There were more fruits and vegetables but smaller meat and whole-grain portions. "You've got less meat on a smaller bun," Linette Dodson told TFK. She is the nutritionist for schools in Carrollton, Georgia. "The change caught everyone's attention."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) established the new school-lunch standards to help keep kids healthy and fight the nation's growing weight problem. The rules limit portion sizes, calories, fat and salt. Some kids, mostly high schoolers and athletes, complained that the leaner meals left them hungry.

In December, the USDA responded by relaxing the rules. Now schools can serve bigger meat and whole-grain portions, as long as these do not exceed calorie limits that the USDA has set for each grade level.

"We understand that these changes are difficult, so we want to be flexible," U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack told TFK. "But we need to educate folks about why eating healthful foods is important."

Good Enough to Eat

Other changes to school lunches have been easier to swallow. Following USDA guidelines, schools have found healthier ways to serve up lunchtime favorites. Fries and chicken nuggets are now baked, not fried. Everything from pizza crust to hot-dog buns to the breading on chicken nuggets is made from whole grains.

Fourth grader Nicholas Mansour is eating up the changes to the menu in Carrollton Middle School's cafeteria. For Nicholas, the best part of the lunch makeover is the new salad bar. It is filled with romaine lettuce, spinach, cucumbers, carrots, cherry tomatoes and chickpeas.

"I like all the different choices," Nicholas says. "I get to choose what I like, and I don't have to pick off the things I don't."

Michelle Kloser is the nutrition director for West Salem Schools, in Wisconsin. She is not surprised that kids can develop an appetite for healthy fare. "The key is to get kids involved," she told TFK. "Give them choices. Introduce them to all different kinds of fruits and veggies. You'll see how excited they can get about nutritious foods."