

Changing taste buds one school lunch at a time: Charleston kids generally accept healthier food



[David Quick](#) [Email](#) [@davidquick](#) Aug 26 2014 12:01 am



Kiernan Hedlund likes the healthier food served in the school cafeteria and prefers it over food brought from home.

William Blair says the brownies are "more healthy than normal brownies," and while he can taste the difference, he still likes them.



[Enlarge](#) Among the lunch choices at some of the Charleston County School District schools is a fresh salad bar, which costs \$2.25, and is displayed in black, rather than stainless steel containers because nutrition service staff found that children responded to the appearance better.

Kimberly Brown likes some healthy options, but not all. This sampling of fifth-graders at Buist Academy in downtown Charleston is indicative of the range of opinions by students in the wake of federally mandated healthier foods served in the cafeterias of public schools in South Carolina and nationwide.

Buist Principal Shawntay White attests to the fact that children's tastes vary widely, but that generally they are accepting it and that now is the ideal time to set the course for a healthier life for them.

"It's an opportunity to make kids healthier, and to help them enjoy healthy meals is exciting," says White, adding that trying often unfamiliar foods falls in line with what Buist tries to do with students on a broader scale.

"We teach our children here to be risk-takers and they are willing to take a risk and give something a try," says White.

Efforts to have better foods in schools moved from the cafeteria to the vending machines (no more candy bars and sugary soft drinks) this school year and continues to stir debate across the nation over whether kids will accept the healthy change.

Surprise, surprise

Through the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, championed by first lady Michelle Obama and signed by President Barack Obama, the U.S. Department of Agriculture made the first major changes in school meals in 15 years in an effort to make students healthier and help stem the childhood obesity epidemic.

School meal revisions significantly increased the amount of whole grains, low-fat dairy, fruits and vegetables in the meals, and set limits for calories, sugars, fats and sodium. Gone are soft drinks, with beverage options being water, unflavored low-fat milk, flavored or unflavored skim milk and certain milk alternatives and 100 percent fruit and vegetable juices.



[Enlarge](#) Buist Academy's Nikki Gee and Charleston County School District Child Nutrition Services Director Walter Campbell look over the hot items served last week, which included brown rice, jambalaya made in a low sodium broth with turkey kielbasa and fresh peppers and onions, curry sweet peas and broccoli soup that contained cauliflower. David Quick/Staff

A study, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and published in "Childhood Obesity" in July, found "widespread student acceptance of healthier lunches."

In spring 2013, researchers conducted the nationally representative surveys about six months after healthier meal standards put forth by the USDA went into effect. They analyzed survey responses from 557 elementary schools across the country.

Most respondents were either principals or school food service providers. They were asked about students' initial reaction to the meals in fall 2012, and how things were progressing a few months later.

Respondents at 70 percent of elementary schools reported that students liked the new lunches.

Across all grade levels, most respondents (56 percent) reported that students complained initially in the fall, but that far fewer students were complaining by the time of the surveys in the spring - showing that students like healthy food as they grow more accustomed to it.

Respondents from elementary and middle schools where a large proportion of the student body was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch reported that very few of the students were discarding the meal.

Lindsey Turner, a Boise State University researcher who was the lead author of the study, added that, contrary to what some contend, "there have not been widespread challenges with kids not buying or eating the meals."

Local reaction

Making positive change often is not easy.



[Enlarge](#) A la carte items at the Buist Academy food line included ham sandwiches on whole wheat and single servings of baby carrots. David Quick/Staff

Dr. Ray Bahadori, director of nutrition and food services for the Dorchester School District 2, says school lunches have changed tremendously in recent years, including lower fat meats, more fruits and vegetables, and

lower sodium items.

"It has been a challenge specifically when some of the fruits or vegetables we offer, the kids are not familiar with or they don't eat it at home," says Bahadori. He adds that the cost is a major factor because "healthy eating is expensive" and the federal government does not offer enough funding to offset the increased costs for the school district.

"But overall students are liking the healthy meals and the latest research shows its going well with kids and they are getting used to it."

In the Berkeley County School District, Director of Child Nutrition Services Linda Fairchild says the department has developed new menu items and that full meal sales are up slightly. The same is not true for other items.

"Our a la carte sales have dropped by more than 60 percent, mostly because we (the child nutrition office) are waiting for items we can sell. The manufacturers are trying to reformulate products and the standards are hard to meet," says Fairchild.

"Losing those a la carte sales will hurt our program," says Fairchild, noting the district's child nutrition programs are "completely self-supporting."

"We pay all our employees, (pay for) benefits, buy equipment, repair equipment and, of course, purchase all the food. No county or state funds are used, so we need every penny to buy fresh fruits and veggies," says Fairchild.

Upping the ante

Emulating an effort by the Greenville County School District, the Charleston County School District is taking the new meals one step further, working on new menus with foods primarily made from scratch, according to Walter Campbell, the district's executive director of nutrition services.

They are using recipes, often using local produce, from the Lowcountry Food Banks' Cooking Matters, Louie's Kids, wellness expert Dr. Ann Kulze and chef Ann Cooper.

Some items include baked "fried" chicken (baking chicken crusted with corn flakes), "tater-less tots (using cauliflower), and "confetti soup" (using kale, black-eyed peas and turkey ham), in recipes developed by Cypress restaurant chef Craig Deihl and Burke High School.

Pizza from scratch proved difficult, but Campbell found a solution using Father's Table flatbread as a simpler, whole grain solution.

Campbell also says the district food staff studied how to make the salad bar more appealing. They discovered that looks matter: If salad is presented in a black pan instead of a stainless steel one, and if the greens are enhanced with other colorful vegetables, students are more likely to go for it.

Campbell says staffs at Buist and Mitchell Elementary piloted the menus last school year and that 10 schools are testing them this year. Besides Buist and Mitchell, the menus are being used at Mary Ford, Memminger, Meeting Street, Springfield and Sullivan's Island elementary schools; Zucker Middle; and Burke and West Ashley high schools.

"We're still in the infancy stage and we're still making changes," says Campbell, who expects to roll the menu out to all 80 district schools in the 2015-16 school year.

"It's a lot more work, but it's exciting, don't you think?"

Reach David Quick at 937-5516.

- **Keywords**

- [Berkeley County School District](#) [Charleston County School District](#)
- [Dorchester District 2](#) [Michelle Obama](#) [Ray Bahadori](#) [Robert Woods Johnson Foundation](#) [Shawntay White](#) [Smart Snacks in Schools](#) [US Department of Agriculture](#) [USDA](#) [Walter Campbell](#)

Nutrition guidelines

Students across the country are now offered healthier school meals with more fruits, vegetables and whole grains through the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

The Smart Snacks in School standards, which started this school year, builds on those requirements by ensuring that all other snack foods and beverages available for sale in school are nutritious.

Any food sold in schools must fit the following:

- **Be a whole grain product.**
- **Have the first ingredient be a fruit, vegetable, dairy product or protein food.**
- **Be a combination food that contains at least a quarter cup of fruit and/or vegetable.**
- **Contain 10 percent of the daily value of one of the nutrients of public health concern (calcium, potassium, vitamin D or dietary fiber).**

Note: As of July 1, 2016, foods may not qualify using the latter criteria.

Foods must also meet nutrient requirements:

- **Calorie limits**
- **Snacks: 200 calories or less.**
- **Entrees: 350 calories or less.**
- **Sodium limits**
- **Snacks: 230 milligrams or less.**
- **Entrees: 480 mg or less.**

On July 1, 2016, snack items must be 200 mg or less per item.

Fat limits:

- **Total fat: 35 percent of calories or less in the item.**
- **Saturated fat: Less than 10 percent of calories in the item.**
- **Trans fat: 0 grams.**

Sugar limits

35 percent or less of weight from total foods.

Beverages allowed

Plain water (with or without carbonation).

Unflavored low-fat milk.

Unflavored or flavored fat-free milk and milk alternatives permitted by the National School Lunch Program.

100 percent fruit or vegetable juice.

100 percent fruit or vegetable juice with water (with or without carbonation) and no added sweeteners.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services