



Education

Keeping kids healthy for less.

Education caterers have one of the toughest tasks in the industry – providing healthy school meals that appeal to students on an incredibly tight budget. Many are finding inventive ways to do so.

Children who eat healthily perform better academically, are less likely to develop depression or anxiety later in life and have lower risk for behavioural and emotional problems than those who consume a diet high in processed foods.

With school lunches contributing as much as 50% of a child's daily calorie intake, at least half of the responsibility for their eating habits lies with the education system.

In fact, a recent survey of more than 1,000 parents conducted by Revolution Foods, which delivers two million healthy meals each week to schools and community programs across the US, revealed that around two-thirds (65%) of parents look to their schools to encourage healthy habits.

Meanwhile only one third (34%) are confident they're doing a good job shaping their children's eating habits at home, with cost cited as one of their key challenges.

Scientific research has confirmed the importance of healthy school meals to children's health. One study showed that children residing in US states with stringent nutritional standards had lower rates of obesity than those in states with more lax regulations surrounding fruit and vegetables, trans fats, milk and whole grains.

In Europe, too, the EU action plan on childhood obesity, which aims to halt the rise of childhood obesity by 2020, focuses heavily on promoting healthy eating habits at school.

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But providing healthy meals that appeal to students, while at the same time as meeting ever-changing nutritional standards, and staying within a tight budget (approximately \$1.30 per student for schools that participate in the free lunch program in the US and £2.30 for each free school meal in UK primary schools) is no easy task for education caterers.

Here are four strategies innovative schools are employing to keep costs low while providing healthy mealtime options for kids.

Four strategies for a healthy meal.

Get creative with veggies

Many school districts in the US have implemented 'healthy choice bars' to encourage children to eat more fruits and vegetables. Last year at the Gooding and Shoshone school districts in Idaho, for example, these featured yoghurt bars with toppings like diced peaches, local raspberries and strawberries, which feel like a treat to students.

Using foods from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foods Program, which provides millions of dollars' worth of agricultural products to schools for free, can help caterers control costs.

Another sure-fire technique to get more fruit and veggies onto children's plates is by hiding them in smoothies or pasta sauces. UK celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, who's been campaigning for healthier school meals for more than ten years, is a huge advocate of this approach.

In addition, clever marketing of healthy options has been proven to be effective. For example, a trial of 'Power Pots – raw vegetables served in colourful beakers, supported by the message 'Eat a Rainbow' – were positively received by pupils in schools in Brighton, UK.

Buy local

Switching to fresh, locally produced food, is not only healthier for children and better for the planet, it can be cheaper because you skip a distributor.



Starting a school garden or a farm-to-school program is even better. These sorts of initiatives educate students about the benefits of buying local, and according to the USDA reduce plate waste and increase student participation in healthy school meal programs.

Buying local is something that's been mandated in Italy since 2010. There, each school meal costs families an average of 5 euros, with the amount subsidised for low-income families.

Longer lunch breaks

There are no national standards for the lunch period length in the US, but perhaps there should be, as a study by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that shorter lunch periods are linked with less healthy eating among children.

Action plan on childhood obesity, which aims to halt the rise of childhood obesity.

The study, which involved 1,001 students in third to eighth grade across six elementary and middle schools in low-income school districts in Massachusetts found that students were significantly less likely to select a fruit as part of their lunch if they had less than 20 minutes to eat their meal, compared with at least 25 minutes.

Additionally, students with fewer than 20 minutes to eat consumed 13% less of their entrée, 10% less of their milk and 12% less of their vegetables compared with students who had at least 25 minutes to eat. There was also more food waste among groups with less time to eat.

The right kitchen equipment

A state-of-the-art cooking system like RATIONAL SelfCookingCenter® allows education caterers to cook healthy meals fast using up to 95% less fat, as well as helping them control costs by reducing cooking shrinkage and saving time, materials and labor costs.

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4167107/>

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24074470>

³<https://mottpoll.org/reports-surveys/healthy-eating-children-parents-not-following-recipe>

⁴<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4147666/>