

A+ school lunches

Do the options available to your kids each day make the grade? Here's how motivated parents can help transform local menus.

A quick scan of the Broward County, Florida, middle school menu reveals the usual: hamburgers, chicken patties, grilled cheese. But dig a little deeper into the lunchtime offerings and you'll find a few surprises, including whole wheat buns, black beans and fruit instead of cookies.

In Broward County, as in many other school districts, parents, administrators and food service directors are working to ensure that school lunches make the nutritional grade. Here's how some have made big improvements in the cafeteria menu and how motivated parents have helped bring about the change.

SCHOOL LUNCH 101

Lesson No. 1 for anyone interested in improving school nutrition: Work

within government guidelines, school schedules, budgets and students' finicky appetites. As Food Network chef Tyler Florence discovered, these lunchline constraints apply even if you're a television personality.

Florence, host of *Tyler's Ultimate* and author of *Tyler's Ultimate: Brilliant Simple Food to Make Any Time* (Clarkson Potter, 2006), joined NBA star Shaquille O'Neal on ABC's 2007 *Shaq's Big Challenge*. The show's premise: helping six Florida kids improve their eating and exercise habits by promoting changes at home and at school. Florence dove into the school cafeteria, but even as a master chef, he found it daunting to serve food for hundreds of students that was palatable, nutritious, quick and affordable.

One challenge: Government requirements

dictate that a school lunch must provide one-third of the day's calorie requirements, a guideline established decades ago when many children did not receive adequate nutrition.

"You can serve a child beans and rice, steamed broccoli, a salad and fruit for dessert," says Susan Levin, R.D., staff dietitian with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "That's a healthy, high-fiber, low-fat, nutritious meal, but there are not enough calories in it to meet the guidelines." To up the calorie count, she says, "you find service directors who pull fruit off for cookies and throw in high-fat cheese on broccoli."

School budgets also depend on the government's commodity foods for inexpensive staples that may not always be rich in nutrients. "I struggled in the kitchen to take what I was given and turn it into something that I would allow my own kids to eat," says Florence.

But while the barriers are very real, they're not insurmountable. By partnering with school officials, many parents have found that positive change is possible.

UPGRADING FARE

Want to help your local school get better marks for taste and nutrition? Here's the crash course:

Speak up for change. Not everyone has the star power of a celebrity chef,



but every parent can join a committee, write a letter or make a phone call. Some, like Debbie Dendinger, have taken it a step further. Her son loved some of the foods on the Broward County middle school menu (biscuits and gravy were a favorite), but Dendinger knew he wasn't making healthy choices. So she signed up for a two-day school nutrition workshop sponsored by the Wellness Forum Foundation. When she returned, educational materials in tow, she met with her son's principal and asked to give a presentation to teachers and staff, which morphed into a talk for students during health class. Dendinger also

health-conscious than parents realize. "I had students attending my presentation write down one thing they learned and what they would change about eating habits," says Dendinger. "The responses were overwhelming. Kids want to know the truth about food, and if we educate them, they go home and educate their parents."

In a roundabout way, that's what happened at Broward County. A vegan student, who wanted more choice in the lunch menu, circulated a petition and proved to administrators that students would purchase vegan items if they were available. "A lot of our success stories come from students who

posters and pamphlets, says Darlene Moppert, R.D., the district's program manager for nutrition education and training. Over the course of a month, students were encouraged to try the vegan food and report whether they liked it. The results were a resounding "yes," and the district started serving a vegan option daily.

Teach by example. As a parent, you are your kids' first and most important teacher, and you play a key role in persuading them to make healthier choices. Encourage them to buy lunch at school and join them at the cafeteria table every now and then. "If parents are positive toward school lunch, kids are more likely to be," says Moppert.

Dendinger is encouraged by the progress at Broward County but knows there's homework ahead. "This isn't something that will be fixed overnight," she says. "We can't just rely on schools. We spend so much time worrying about friends, video games and clothes, and we're missing the most important thing: what's going in our children's mouths." 🌱

LEARN MORE: For more tips, visit [the School Nutrition Association at schoolnutrition.org](http://schoolnutrition.org) and click on **Especially for Parents.**

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volunteered to serve on the school's nutrition committee.

Of course, many parents aren't able to attend conferences or meetings. That's OK. A letter or phone call to the school food service director or principal may be all it takes to set the wheels of change in motion.

Give students a voice. Sure, kids may be tuned in to text messaging and sports scores, but many are also more

are fed up with school lunches," says Levin. "Kids have a strong voice too."

Aim for kid appeal. It's not enough just to slap a healthier choice on a school menu and hope kids will gravitate to it. You have to sell it. So when administrators in Broward County decided to implement a pilot program offering a weekly vegan entrée, they got creative, holding a taste test and promoting the health benefits through

