
School lunches a balancing act to satisfy diverse populations, loosened regulations

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Carol Lynch has been packing school lunches for kids since the mid-1980s, first for her own children, then for her grandchildren. For her, buying lunch from school has never really been a consideration.

“It’s nothing against the lunches they serve,” said Lynch, who has helped raise two generations of kids in the same Plymouth home. “For me, food has always been about family. No one can put personal touches on food like a parent or grandparent. [Whether it’s] a Thanksgiving meal or a quick school lunch, I just like to use food as a way of showing my love.”

But given all of children across the state who do take part in their school’s lunch programs, food service departments have the complex task of designing menus that meet an ever-growing diverse student population. There are allergies and food restrictions, pressure to offer newer and healthier choices while also increasing participation rates (read: more revenue), and Federal food guidelines that are changing under the current presidential administration.

Add it all up, and the question of “what’s on the menu today?” is more complicated now than ever before.

Lynch guesses she has made more than 2,000 peanut butter (or in recent years, due to allergies, almond butter) and jelly sandwiches for school lunches. She said she doesn’t really take calories into account, but feels her lunches are balanced and help kids make it through the day.

“Allergies aside, the human body hasn’t changed all that much in 40 years,” she said. “What was good for a kid back then should still be good now. It’s mostly just the price of bread that’s changed.”

But ask a school district's food service manager about school lunches, and they will tell you a different story. School lunches have evolved quite a bit in the past few decades, they say, needing to be healthier, more diverse and to take into account a growing list of dietary restrictions.

"Food has become so much more researched and discovered," said chef Andrew Bernard of Provincetown Schools. "We naturally have to adapt to how humanity sees anything, including child nutrition. I'm so lucky to be able to be given the opportunity to affect the way children grow up with food."

Bernard has been in his position for more than three years, and likes the ability to play around with his menus. He said he offers students his favorite meal from his childhood, *lomo saltado*, a Peruvian steak-tip dish with rice, corn and French fries, and has even experimented with meatless protein products that come from a mushroom-like plant.

Bernard admits the relatively small student population at Provincetown Schools (which serves about 150 students in grades K-8) makes it easier to tailor menu items. Many larger districts rely on outside vendors, such as Whitsons Culinary Group, for their dining services operations.

Kelly Friend, chief operating officer for contract management with Whitsons, with headquarters in New York but several clients across Massachusetts, said each district they partner with is different, but one of their main goals as the food service provider is to promote as diverse and flavorful a menu as possible.

"Younger audiences have much more sophisticated palates than they did in the past," Friend said. "Around 20 years ago, I couldn't get a kid to eat one piece of sushi, but now kids eat sushi at home, at restaurants. It's just another food to them."

Dartmouth Public Schools School Nutrition Director Jeanne Sheridan said "Student participation is soaring under the many changes made in the past year." Last school year, the district served an additional 22,917 meals, or an increase of 8.2%.

That could be because some meals sound like what a student might find in a college cafeteria as opposed to a local public school. New items are offered each month, introduced through student taste tests. Once students approve items,

they make their way onto the menu, Sheridan said in a statement.

New items introduced this year include General Tso's chicken, Mandarin orange chicken, veggie lo mein, a top-your-own-taco bar, hummus and tabouli bowls and an "extensive salad variety."

The district plans to introduce more meatless options including a plant-based burger and falafel, Sheridan said.

Friend said more attention is now paid to recognizing different cultures through menus, either of students who are in the schools or to simply expose students to how different parts of the world eat. This can be a benefit, but also a challenge.

"We've seen a lot of success with ethnic-themed foods, such as Asian dishes, Tex-Mex, or Indian," she said. "But then, you have to worry about making the food appealing and tasty. We track new foods very closely to make sure they are being consumed. The saying goes, a food can't really be considered nutritious unless a child is eating it."

New Bedford Public Schools Food and Nutrition Services Department head Robert Shaheen boasts that the district served more than 3 million breakfast and lunch meals to more than 14,000 students during the 2018-2019 school year.

At a School Committee meeting in June, he reported that breakfast participation averages over 80% and lunch participation averages over 75%.

The district also recently launched a website, nbpsmeals.com including menus and nutrition information and the district wellness policy.

In a large district like New Bedford, there are 13 schools used as hubs to feed the other schools that don't have complete kitchens.

"It's kind of an amazing process and, you know, the goal is to keep things consistent and taste good when it gets cooked, so we're looking at new ways in trying to invest in more equipment at those schools that don't have full kitchens," Shaheen told the School Committee.

A shift in regulations

In late 2018, the United States Department of Agriculture, under the direction of President Donald Trump, finalized plans to roll back regulations set forth in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 that were advocated for by then-First Lady Michelle Obama. Specifically, the rollback lowered nutrition standards for whole grains, flavored beverages and the sodium content of lunches served in school cafeterias.

Friend said it is ultimately up to individual districts to decide if they want to change their nutritional offerings, but Whitsons advocates for the guidelines outlined in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. For example, the new regulations will require 50 percent whole grain offerings, but Whitsons will continue to offer a 100-percent whole-grain menu.

Friend acknowledged some districts might consider it a positive to be able to offer fewer whole grains, if they think students will be more likely to buy the alternatives. She said plain bagels and white rice are common examples of this. This gets at the balancing act of offering healthy foods versus providing options kids will actually order.

Dartmouth is adhering to the current sodium requirements and will continue serving .5% low-fat milk, but is making some adjustments with grains.

Based on their own preferences, students should once again see white pasta, rice, hot dog rolls, and sandwich wraps. All other items such as snacks, breakfast items and breaded items such as a chicken patty will still be whole grain.

“Our macaroni & cheese, which we have been preparing with wheat pasta, was the largest complaint we had on student surveys last year, due to its ‘brown’ appearance,” Sheridan said. “Our staff is thrilled to be able to produce an entree that is typically a kid favorite, with white pasta this year.”

Marshall said Newton will continue to adhere to the guidelines in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, even though participation in the school lunch program is around 30 percent, a number he considers “relatively low.”

“No matter what, it would be a big step backward to undo all the hard work we did after the [Obama-era] regulations were formed,” he said. “I think a lot of people realize the value of eating healthier and cutting certain things out of their diets.”

A push to go local

While all lunches must meet minimum federal nutrition requirements, decisions about what specific foods to serve and how they are prepared are made by local school authorities. That flexibility allows Bernard to make a push for locally grown food wherever possible.

He said most of the district's orders come from two large purveyors on the Cape, but he is currently looking at additional vendors that may have even more local, fresh and competitively priced items.

Friend said statewide, Massachusetts makes a strong push to get as much local food in schools as possible. She pointed to schools partnering with the Massachusetts Farm to School organization as an example.

If one walked into Dartmouth schools today, they'd find locally grown lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, squash, cucumbers, apples and peaches, according to Sheridan. She noted that students in the Garden Club at the Middle School have started the seeds to help with the fresh lettuce supply throughout the year.

New Bedford uses procured fish products from Red's Best and has used North Coast Seafood in the city for fish items. It is looking at other local vendors this year, Shaheen said in a statement.

"We are increasing our Farm to School initiatives throughout the district as it is our goal to offer as many local farm items and fresh items as possible," Shaheen said.

The district is partnering the Marion Institute and piloting a Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Grant program which helps to provide additional fresh fruits and vegetables as snack options in several NBPS schools. The hope is to expand the program to all schools in the district next year, he said.

Nearly 70 percent of public schools in the state participate in Farm to School activities in various ways, and more than 200 school gardens have been set up across the state through the partnerships (with food from the gardens often ending up directly in lunches at the school).

Friend also pointed to the Red's Best organization, which makes it easier for schools to serve local, freshly caught seafood in their meals.

“We often look at geographic preferences in our menus, and in Massachusetts, there is certainly a strong desire to be as local as possible,” Friend said. “I think that says a lot about the types of foods families in the state are eating, and what foods they want to continue to eat as their children grow up.”

Aimee Chiavaroli contributed to this report