

What's on the menu is more important than ever as Cambridge school lunches diversify

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In Cambridge, where many students speak a home language other than English, school lunches have grown to be a far more complex, yet exciting challenge for food services.

At Cambridge Public Schools breakfast is free, and, for lunch, 43 percent of the student body qualified for free or reduced-price meals last year. Now, with help from the city, students who previously qualified for reduced-price meals now get them for free. This means what's on the cafeteria menu is more important than ever.

But this is a common challenge across the state as a high number of students partake in their school lunch programs. Food service departments have the challenging task of designing menus that meet an ever-growing diverse student population, while also remaining vigilant when it comes to allergies and food restrictions. The pressure is high 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.

Ask a school district's food services manager and they will tell you school lunches have evolved quite a bit in the past few decades, needing to be healthier, more diverse and to take into account a growing list of dietary restrictions.

For Mellissa Honeywood, director of Food and Nutrition Services in Cambridge Public Schools, and her staff of 60 employees this pressure to have innovative offerings is more exciting than daunting as she looks to further incorporate various culinary cultures.

About 32 percent of Cambridge residents speak a language other than English at home, according to the most recent U.S. Census figures. Twenty-eight percent of the Class of 2019 at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School spoke a home language other than English, with the top languages being Spanish, Haitian Creole, Amharic, Bengali, Somali and Portuguese. According to the 2013-2017 American Community Survey, 28.2 percent of Cambridge residents are foreign born.

“For the past 5-6 years we have partnered with the Cambridge Health Alliance to run an International Taste Testing Series,” said Honeywood. “We reach out to the community to receive family recipes reflective of their heritage. Through this program we adapt the recipes to fit school nutrition standards while maintaining cultural authenticity.”

Recipes with the most enthusiastic responses from Cambridge students, and are thus folded into a six-week menu cycle, include: Bangladeshi chicken biryani, Ethiopian doro wat, Haitian legume, Jamaican jerk chicken, Chinese tomato and tofu stir-fry, and Puerto Rican fricassee de pollo, according to Honeywood.

A shift in regulations

Many larger districts rely on outside vendors, such as Whitsons Culinary Group, for their dining services operations. But CPS is a self-operating district, Honeywood said, which makes it easier for food services to make its own decisions about what to offer.

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.

It is ultimately up to individual districts to decide if they want to change their nutritional offerings, but many advocate for the guidelines outlined in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The new regulations, for example, will require 50 percent whole-grain offerings, but districts like Cambridge will continue to offer a 100 percent whole-grain menu.

“Cambridge is fortunate that our schools have been offering whole grain rich foods before it was even required under the HHSFKA. Our kitchens and students have become accustomed to the whole grain products and we do not plan to roll that back,” said Honeywood.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, state regulations require schools to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which recommend no more than 30 percent of an individual’s calories come from fat, and less than 10 percent from saturated fat. Regulations also establish a standard for school meals to provide one-third of the recommended daily allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories.

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. Across the state districts are making a strong push to get as much local food in schools as possible.

Many, like Cambridge, partner with the Massachusetts Farm to School organization as an example. 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).

“Sometimes, individual cafeterias are able to integrate ingredients from the school’s CitySprouts garden into a meal -- most often, this might be fresh herbs harvested by the students themselves,” said Honeywood.

Cambridge schools have other local partners, like Mayflower Poultry in Cambridge for fresh chicken; Fantini Bread in Haverhill for fresh bread; Drumlin Farms in Lincoln for local produce; 21st Century Foods in Jamaica Plain for fresh tofu), and 88 Acres in Dorchester for breakfast seed bars.

To learn more about what’s on the school lunch menu, visit cpsd.us/cms.