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Hummus in the school cafeteria?

Vendors pitch healthier foods for kids, face an uphill struggle

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Brian Kersey / AP

Robin Lightfoot, left, of Garden City, Kan., listens to Kathy Cheop as she samples hummus at the Wild Garden booth at the School Nutrition Association annual meeting in Chicago on July 17, 2007.

AP Associated Press
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CHICAGO - Mark Smith is convinced he can turn a generation of junk-food eaters into die-hard devotees of what he calls "the salsa of this decade."

The dynamo treat? Single-serve portions of hummus and it may be coming to a school cafeteria near you.

As the federal government prepares to raise standards for food served in schools, vendors like Smith are rolling out healthier versions of lunchroom favorites. Now there are whole-grain pizzas and baked chicken nuggets, along with new offerings like hummus. It's all part of an uphill — and so far losing — battle to slow rising [obesity rates](#).

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Government rules, which limit fat and require certain levels of vitamins and protein, are about to get tougher. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the national school lunch and breakfast programs, will announce changes by the end of the year.

Healthy choices don't alter bad habits But getting kids to choose broccoli florets over a fries-and-soda combo is a tall order. A recent Associated Press review of school nutrition studies found that classes on healthy foods and menu changes in the lunchroom have had little effect in altering generally bad [eating habits](#) of U.S. school kids.

"I've witnessed kids who have a choice of fresh foods and vegetables and other choices and they choose the other choices, because that's what kids do," said Dr. Reginald Washington of Denver, who is on a committee on childhood obesity for the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Kids agree. Sean McCarney, a 12-year-old from North Huntington, Pa., says his peers are "programmed to like fried stuff so it's hard for them to change over."

Food suppliers know that, and they are scurrying to find options that could become lunchroom favorites.

While hawking his hummus and pita chips at this week's School Nutrition Association annual meeting in Chicago, Smith rattled off the health benefits of the garbanzo bean-based dip.

"It tastes really good," he added. But it may not be for everyone, especially young eaters, said the vice president of sales for Ziyad Brothers Importing of Cicero, Ill.

"The name hummus scares them a little bit," he said.

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Perdue Farms Inc. can attest to the challenge of developing healthy but still appealing options. When the company tested chicken nuggets with whole-grain breading two years ago, "it came out looking like baked bugs," said Doyleene Jones, national sales manager for the company's school food service.

"It doesn't do you any good to make something if the kids are going to throw it in the trash can," she said.

Now the Salisbury, Md., company's most popular school sellers include drumsticks and spicy breaded chicken bites with a partial whole-grain breading that are baked in cafeterias.

Taste tests for students

To tempt taste buds, many schools hold sampling events for students.

Connie Mueller, a food service director from Bloomington, Ill., has used taste-testing to OK a whole-wheat pizza but nix breaded baked fish. Vegetables often have the most difficult time getting kid approval.

"Sometimes they have to see it, they have to see other people eating it," she said. "Sometimes it's texture, sometimes it's smell."

Some nutrition experts contend that regardless of changes made to items like pizza and chicken nuggets, those choices still aren't the best.

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Washington, the pediatrics specialist, is among those who hope schools ditch the bad-food options entirely so children are forced to choose from healthy-only alternatives for at least one meal each day.

Still, he says, "schools shouldn't be given total responsibility" for changing bad eating habits.

And it's a struggle for school systems to buy fresh, wholesome food on tiny budgets.

Whole-wheat bread, for instance, can cost pennies more a serving than traditional white bread. That may not seem like much, until you consider that districts like Janey Thorton's in Hardin County, Ky., must hold their local spending to 85 cents a day per meal.

Despite the challenges, educators say they hope the updated meals introduce children to new foods, like sliced kiwis, blood oranges, and even hummus.

"It's our jobs as adults to teach children how to eat," said Thorton, president of the School Nutrition Association. "We're not going to turn this around overnight. We have to change parents, too. It's going to take everybody."

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