



Shifting School Food Culture

Middle school teacher Dan Treinis' passion for food education was fueled by garbage. "As a new teacher on lunch duty, I watched in amazement at the sheer amount of trash that was produced," he says. Concerned, he connected with healthful-food-focused parent and artist Bonnie Acker. The pair pondered how to transform school food as it moved both into and out of the cafeteria.

"Separating cafeteria food for compost seemed like a good starting point," says Bonnie. "After all, we figured it could take 25 years to improve school food." But the early compost calculations, it turns out, gave them what they needed to bring edibles to the forefront. The first step was a survey to find out just how much lunch food 700 students in grades K–8 were throwing away. Sure, the total quantity was impressive, but Bonnie was most interested in tracking what students were opting to eat and what they left behind. A group of volunteer parents, teachers, and students kept watch for a week, noting what was left on food trays each day: 54 percent of the mashed potatoes got tossed on Monday, 50 percent of the salad on Tuesday, half the vanilla pudding another day, and so on.

"We told curious students that we cared about their preferences and wanted them to be key players in making decisions about new items," explains Bonnie. She adds that because the ad hoc food group had hard data on consumption, people saw them as more credible. The group also learned that involving parents in the process broadened the base of support for making changes in the school food arena. (Note: Today, the compost program that launched this research diverts up to 80 percent of cafeteria waste from the landfill, and has spread to other schools throughout the district!)

Taste Tests: Thumbs-Up for New Menu Items

Armed with data, an overview of cafeteria consumption, and thoughts on how to slowly integrate some menu changes, the educators began meeting with Doug Davis, the district foodservice

Student Palates Lead the Way

Parents, teachers, foodservice staff, and community partners sit together on a school food council. Students develop and test recipes, survey peers in the cafeteria, and promote "good eats." Project partners help the foodservice staff meet budgets and nutritional needs by using a blend of commodity goods and fresh local products.

**Edmunds Middle School
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BURLINGTON SCHOOL FOOD PROJECT

director. His bottom line: If you want to change lunchroom food, you've got to ensure that kids will eat the new stuff, and the way to do that is to involve them so they have a stake in the project. And so they do. As often as possible, students' palates are primed for an official cafeteria taste test. Before new items make it to the lunchroom taste-test table, students, chefs, and other community volunteers join foodservice and Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day) staff to invent recipes using wholesome (and often local) ingredients; classes then test different versions. "When students have a hand in deciding which types and amounts of ingredients should go into something, they have fun and become intellectually and emotionally involved," says Bonnie.

When the school decided to test yogurt fruit parfaits, for example, one class experimented with recipes for the granola topping. Bonnie and the nutrition educator from a local food market gave the group 12 recipe options and invited them to experiment with different types of sweeteners (e.g., maple syrup, honey, brown sugar). When a couple of boys asked to strike out on their own, the adults honored their request. Word has it that the extra dose of maple syrup may have gotten their concoction top ranking! The class-endorsed granola now shows up at several schools on the school sandwich/salad bar, in parfaits, and among breakfast choices.



PHOTOS: BURLINGTON SCHOOL FOOD PROJECT

"One of our big recipe successes has been minestrone," says Bonnie. The secret ingredient: pesto, which was initially created by first graders from armloads of basil they'd picked at a community farm. Then there were the 59 trials of whole-grain cookies — many of which were baked or tested by students — that yielded a popular oatmeal/chocolate chip option dubbed "localicious" by one girl. As tasty as they were, they haven't yet passed muster with the foodservice

because of the ingredient costs and preparation time. But neither the students nor the foodservice has ruled them out entirely. "If more ingredients were produced in Vermont, we'd love to use them, but we need to stay competitive with the low-cost version of the cookie now being served," says Bonnie.

The Lunchroom Test

Once a healthful kid-friendly recipe bears fruit in one or more classrooms, it is put in front of a larger audience. Each month, a group of students (many of whom build skills through a special "success" class) help prepare taste-test items. Then they serve up the fresh fare at a separate table in the lunchroom. These student researchers go table to table, clipboards in hand, and ask the diners three basic questions: Did you try it? Did you like it? Would you try it again? Finally, they tabulate results. With approval from the diners, foods like the vegetable pizza with partially whole-grain crust, yogurt parfaits with granola, and minestrone have made their way onto the monthly menu.

"The cafeteria is becoming more of a classroom," says Dan. In addition to new student-approved menu items, it sports a sandwich bar with options

that include meat, cheese, hummus with pesto, cut vegetables, baby greens, and other products from local sources, and a salad bar offering as many local items as possible. Sometimes farmers participate in a taste test by handing out samples of their fresh vegetables. And the walls are graced with stunning student-painted, larger-than-life panels showing Vermont crops like strawberries and squash. Bonnie contends that any school working on changing food attitudes and behaviors should have artwork in the cafeteria. “I think subliminal advertising does work,” she admits.



Participating teachers concur that when students are asked for honest feedback and see their preferences incorporated into lunchroom offerings, they become enthusiastic advocates and participants — and cafeteria sales sometimes go up, too. “Kids don’t get listened to often enough, or asked for input on solutions to problems,” says Bonnie. “But they are excited about being key people in changing a key part of their lives.” She adds that they also have a chance to see the relationship between what they do and larger changes in society. “I let them know that their story is being told and is inspiring people nationally.”

It Takes a Team

“You don’t have to have a degree in anything to begin to build a project like this,” says Dan. “There are lots of places to start, and any one will get you moving.” In fact, Bonnie suggests that a classroom teacher wanting to explore food education start with just one activity for the year (for example, a parent open house featuring some foods kids have helped prepare). But to launch a comprehensive program, Dan suggests building a team of people who have food in common. “Then appeal to their common sense. After all, kids [perform] better if they eat well. It’s a logical link that’s hard to argue with.”

With that in mind, Dan and other “charter” participants formed a school-wide food committee that includes the foodservice director, foodservice and Vermont FEED staff, teachers, parents, and local chefs and farmers. At lively monthly meetings, the group chooses foods to test in the classrooms and the cafeteria, keeping in mind students’ flavor preferences, foodservice staff time, and food costs. The team also invites other people to its meetings, whose input or partnerships can help the taste-test initiative thrive. These include foodservice workers, Americorps volunteers, and university students. Bonnie underscores the importance of engaging volunteers, particularly in the early stages. “You can’t just saddle the foodservice by asking them to prepare foods for taste tests,” she explains. (Funds raised by the council and community partners go into a “food fund” at a local market, which provides items for the recipe trials.)

Food education leaders across the country echo the same refrain: Involve the foodservice directors and staff, and work toward incremental — not dramatic

I’m just an ordinary person who encourages parents and other community people... to work together. By doing this, you can come to wildly successful solutions.

— Bonnie Acker,
parent volunteer



PHOTOS: BURLINGTON SCHOOL
FOOD PROJECT

— changes. “The biggest thing I’ve learned by working with the people in the foodservice is just how much they are hampered by the government,” says Dan. “For instance, they can’t just buy or serve whatever they want at any time, and they need to incorporate a lot of government commodity foods.” (These are farm surplus foods provided free or at low cost by the government.) What’s more, he adds, the foodservice is understaffed, and workers are underpaid.

“The people who make the meals day in and day out are at the heart of school-food change,” says Bonnie. From the beginning, the fruitful relationship between foodservice staff and other food advocates has nurtured a wide variety of creative ideas and productive results. “What’s kept us

working together with open minds is our commitment to the kids,” Bonnie reflects. “We respect one another, we groan at the obstacles, we laugh, and we come up with solutions.” Groups such as Vermont FEED share resources on topics like sourcing local foods and offer professional development opportunities for school kitchen staff.

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— Dan Treinis,
Teacher

Menu Tweaks

Changing the menu doesn’t mean throwing out old favorites like chicken patties or pizza. Sometimes it means adding new side dishes or shifting ingredients. For instance, students made and sampled whole-grain pizza crusts, which “tested” well. So the foodservice director asked a local owner of a national chain to create a whole-grain crust for the schools. No such luck. But a food company in the Midwest stepped up to deliver crusts made partly with whole-grain flour. The director didn’t stop there, and eventually found a local baker to make whole-wheat-crust pies.

When the cafeteria waste study revealed that half the salads prepacked in plastic containers were thrown away, the foodservice challenge was to make healthful greens and vegetables more palatable. A lunchroom salad and sandwich bar now offers students a choice of wholesome local toppings and side dishes. It turns out that because the produce is fresh and flavorful, much less is wasted, so the economics look pretty good, too.



Schools get such a deal on commodity foods that they can hardly meet budgets without them. Unfortunately, say some nutritionists, they’re not always the best foods for kids. But Bonnie describes a case in which combining commodities with whole and fresh ingredients makes a big difference. “When Doug asked me and a food coop staffer to experiment with cranberry sauce, I thought, ‘It’s so high in sugar!’” But combined with apples and topped with oats and sunflower seeds, it makes a flavorful fruit crisp.

The foodservice director and Vermont FEED are also working with state-level commodity program officials to make more local items, such as carrots and winter squash,

available to all schools. “After eight years, we managed to get local apples onto the commodity list,” exclaims Doug. “There are many other farm products that could be distributed, benefiting both farmers and kids.” Through direct farm to school agreements, Burlington schools are receiving more and more in-season crops. For instance, autumn lettuce, baby greens, tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers make their way into sandwiches and salads. Summer-grown zucchini, basil, and kale are processed and frozen for year-round use.

Reaping Results

“The relationship between our original teacher–parent advocacy group and the foodservice has shifted from one of cautious skepticism to a very good one,” says Dan. “I think it’s because we all understand where everybody comes from and the limits we all face.” Says Family and Consumer Science teacher Ginger Farineau, “Early on, Bonnie and others constantly reinforced what the foodservice director was doing well, and discussed what could be improved. Before long, they were partners. It was the beginning of a real paradigm shift.”



RESOURCES FOR A CITYWIDE EFFORT

According to Doug Davis, the Burlington School District foodservice director, “thousands of pounds of Vermont-grown fruits and vegetables are coming into school cafeterias.” Many groups are working to improve city school lunches, boost nutrition education, and build a sustainable local food system. Learn what a coordinated citywide effort looks like:

Burlington Community Food Assessment

www.cedo.ci.burlington.vt.us/legacy/documents_files/community_food_assessment_2004.pdf

The Burlington School Food Project

www.shelburnefarms.org/PDFs/BSFPNewsletter2005Color.pdf

VT FOOD EDUCATION EVERY DAY (FEED)

Vermont’s FEED project is designed to improve food, farm, garden, and nutrition education, and support local growers (and, in turn, the local economy). Rather than simply introduce more healthful foods in the cafeteria, VT FEED’s strategy focuses on what it calls the “Three Cs”: classroom, cafeteria, and community. School- and community-based leadership teams attend professional development courses and collaborate with project mentors on standards-based curriculum development and assessment.



Project staff work with school kitchen managers to integrate fresh foods into lunch programs. Farmers sell food to schools, host student groups, and visit classrooms. Students grow, cook, taste, eat, and explore. And parents and the broader community feast on student fare, concoct new recipes with children at home, and help this ambitious vision bear fruit. For more information and resource links, go to VT FEED’s Web site, www.vtfeed.org.