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News

## Bill aims to cook up healthier school food

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There was a time when a cheeseburger with a side of fries, mayonnaise and pop were the average fare in a high school cafeteria.

Those days are long gone at Mentor High School as students filed through the cafeteria at 10 a.m. Friday, selecting items such as 100 percent fruit juice or green tea, broccoli, grilled chicken salads, wraps and baked chips.

"I have an excellent staff, they're very creative," said Ginni Vaccaro, kitchen manager at Mentor High School. "Ever since we got rid of the french fries a few years back, they've become really creative on what these kids eat and their eating habits."

Vegetarian offerings have become popular, she said. "I actually even tried hummus and tabula on these students," Vaccaro said. "They actually loved it, so we'll be bringing that back in again. (Students) are very savvy. Much more educated than when I was in school."

While many school districts such as Mentor have already made strides to ditch the junk food and bring on the vegetables, a recently unveiled U.S. Senate bill aims to streamline these efforts.

### The bill

The legislation, called the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, is moving toward a vote in the Senate that will provide \$4.5 billion in new child nutrition program funding over 10 years, according to United Press International.

The measure would:

- \* Expand the at-risk after-school program from a snack to a meal.
- \* Allow schools in high-poverty areas to offer free meals to all students without collecting paper applications to reduce administrative burdens.
- \* Add a 6-cent-per-meal increase to help schools meet healthier standards.
- \* Give the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture the authority to establish national nutrition standards for all foods sold on school campus throughout the school day.
- \* Facilitate planting school gardens and using local foods in school cafeterias.

U.S. Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., chairwoman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, introduced the legislation at a news conference in Washington in March.

"The bill invests heavily to automatically enroll more eligible low-income children with our National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs and includes a major expansion of after-school feeding programs," Lincoln said at the news conference, according to UPI.

### **Schools take on**

#### **the bill**

"It will depend on how this all turns out, but again, we totally support funding for helping nutrition. We want to see access to nutritious meals for all children," said Jeni Lange, food service supervisor for Mentor Schools. "There are many positive things in the legislation. There are also some things that will depend on the funding (piece), how it's going to work."

Lange said in Mentor, the school district is very aware of the trends for better school nutrition and already has put many ideas into practice.

"Our students' transition into a lot of the proposed legislation, they won't even notice because we have done those things," Lange said. "We certainly are hopeful of the federal funding in this. Everybody knows when you get into healthier food, the healthier it is, the more expensive it becomes."

Vicki Peters, a registered dietitian and food service director for Perry Schools, said anything that can help make sure students get their lunch is a plus in her book.

"You don't want anyone to go hungry obviously, so I think that's good and I think it's good they've decided to take a look at the (free and reduced lunches) program and how we can beef it up and how we can make sure we're not missing any students," she said.

Echoing Peters, Chad Welker, business services director for South Euclid-Lyndhurst Schools, said everything seems very positive in the legislation, especially increasing efforts to end childhood hunger.

"I know we've definitely put in an effort in making sure we're able to identify as many free- and reduced-lunch students as we can and we've worked hard to make that process as easy as possible so that kids have access to a healthy and nutritional breakfast and lunch each day," he said. "I think it would be a very positive piece of legislation."

### **What's already**

#### **been done**

While all three school districts agreed the legislation would be a positive change across the nation, they also emphasized their own

recent efforts.

"We've definitely had a proactive approach to offering healthy nutritious meals in our food service program," Welker said. "A couple pieces we've worked on so far is increasing the number of fresh fruits and vegetables that are offered as part of the meal option.

"We're also exploring our supply relationship with local producers to increase the quality of fresh fruits and vegetables that we receive on a daily basis and we have a wellness policy that really does cover a lot of the things that I think are being brought up in the 'Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act' in the Senate."

South Euclid-Lyndhurst Schools has tackled the overall concept of healthier lunch programs for at least the last five years, having set up a wellness committee and being more proactive, Welker said.

"I think we've been doing this for a few years, trying to be as proactive as possible and providing healthy and nutritious options to our kids and promoting free and reduced lunches and breakfasts to all of our students," Welker said. "That's actually resulted in dramatic increases in our reimbursable lunches and breakfasts that we serve daily."

Perry Schools has not only followed the state guidelines for school lunch programs, but has also taken it a step further by following the Alliance for a Healthier Generation guidelines.

"We've gone to all baked snacks, we have none of the regular chips, and we're trying to focus on portion sizes because it's not necessarily (only) what you eat, it's how much you eat. We don't supersize anything. It boils down to portion control and all of those things," she said.

She added beverages have also become healthier, focusing on portion size as well as offering only 100 percent fruit juice, low-fat milks and no pop during lunchtime.

"We offer to all students every single day, salads, carrots and celery, fresh apples and oranges, sometimes we'll feature grapes or watermelon and it's really neat because they take it and they eat it," she said with a chuckle. "We have a health-conscious group of kids."

While Peters said the focus on healthier lunch programs has grown more and more every year, there's really been a big push in the last three.

"I think people in general are trying to think a little more health conscious. The students here are very proactive in wanting healthy choices and doing more things to promote a healthier lifestyle," she said, adding Perry Schools has won the Ohio Department of Education's Stellar Award for Best Nutritional Practices for three consecutive years. "Again, we all have to do our part to work towards these goals," she added.

Mentor Schools also has won the Stellar Award the last two years and takes pride in the fact it has focused on healthy food offerings for some time, Lange said.

"Childhood obesity issues have already been in the forefront of school nutrition programs for awhile," she said. "In Mentor, we started way ahead of any national legislation in making our programs healthier ... making sure our snacks were those that would be approved under the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

"We focus a great deal on fresh produce, whole grains, lower fat meats and cheeses ... We've had our national manufacturers reformulate the foods that we eat and make them healthier."

Beverages at Mentor also have turned toward 1 percent milk, bottled water, 100 percent fruit juice, and beverages must contain 10 calories or less per 8 ounces except for milk or the 100 percent fruit juice, Lange said.

"And again, we try to be ahead as far as keeping our nutrition information on the school website so all the parents can access that information," she added.

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