

## Boston Globe: Medford Providing Healthy Lunch

The following picture and story are from the Boston Globe Northwest section, Thursday, February 5, 2009:



Andrews Middle School students are pictured above in their cafeteria. Photo by Joanne Rathe, Boston Globe.

### Let's redo lunch

**Medford is providing healthier fare in its school lunchrooms**

**By Brad Kane, Globe Correspondent | February 5, 2009**

Connor Flynn, an eighth-grader at Andrews Middle School in Medford, used to get pizza every day for his school lunch.

His mother, Kathy Flynn, got frustrated as he abandoned healthy eating habits at home for simply what was available in the cafeteria.

But as the Medford school system has made healthier lunches a priority, Connor - to his mother's liking - has chosen more nutritious options like salads, chicken fingers, and sunbutter, which is a substitute for peanut butter.

"I notice a lot of the girls eat salads now," Connor Flynn said.

Revolutionizing the way Medford children eat their school lunch hasn't been an easy task.

In the year since Medford public schools hired a systemwide chef as part of its initiative toward healthier lunches, new recipes have been introduced, the staff has been trained in nutritional cooking, and processed foods have been removed. But it has been more evolution than revolution.

"I'm just realizing every project takes longer than I thought it would have," said Bridget Collins, the chef and nutrition coordinator for the Medford schools.

Collins was hired in January 2008 at a salary of \$45,000 as the next phase in the Medford schools' ongoing project to remove the ready-made, sodium-and-sugar-laden food with fresher, healthier meals made from scratch. By changing what students eat, the concept is to improve their short- and long-term dietary habits and possibly improve classroom performance by ridding their bodies of the substances bogging them down, said Jeanne Irwin, Medford's food services director.

"The food these kids were eating when I came on in '03-'04, it was appalling," Irwin said. "We were loading these kids up with empty calories and sugar that was affecting their entire school performance."

Irwin helped rid Medford schools of sodas and salty and sugary snacks and replaced them with healthier items like baked potato chips. Frozen vegetables took over for canned vegetables, more whole grains were added, baking replaced frying.

Kathy Flynn is pleased with the change, no longer loathing what her son Connor might be eating at school.

"It is kind of nice that they are getting vegetables in the middle of the day because what Connor was doing before was getting the pizza sticks," Kathy Flynn said.

Jonathan Considine, spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, said this focus on changing students' dietary habits is the start of a larger trend in the Commonwealth's schools. While Medford is among the first, other districts like Waltham, Framingham, Boston, and Somerville are undertaking similar ventures.

"Habits definitely are formed early on in life," said Rhonda Spigel, the Waltham schools' food service director. "It is really, really important to get these kids at the earliest level and introduce new foods and healthier foods."

Collins was brought into Medford as a nutritional expert who could modify the schools' recipes, make new recipes using the government ingredients, and train the 58 school food employees on nutrition and better cooking techniques.

Since she started last year, she has run into obstacles such as limitations on money, equipment, ingredients, and time. The food service staff had to be trained in preparing school lunches in a different way.

"It is a big, big, big change from throwing things on a tray - frozen chicken nuggets, frozen pizza," said Maureen Hennigan, food service manager at McGlynn Elementary and Middle School and an 11-year employee of the system.

Students were used to eating certain foods and weren't always adventurous enough to spend their lunch money on a new food, Hennigan said.

"There are some kids who sit at my table who just get chips and cookies, and that's their lunch," Connor Flynn said. "They do look at what other kids are getting and say, 'That looks good.'"

In her first year, Collins has introduced the broccoli and cheese quiche, pasta salad, pizza burgers, honey baked ham, entree salads, and fresh-made breakfast muffins. Many of the menu items remain the same - such as beef tacos - but the ingredients have changed: fresh ground meat and seasoning made from scratch instead of frozen prepared taco meat.

To introduce a new recipe Collins has to finalize the ingredients, notify the school of the change, notify the parents of students with allergies, and have a free tasting at the cafeterias, so students are more apt to buy when it is on the menu.

Collins deflects all credit onto the lunch employees of the seven school cafeterias, who prepare the roughly 2,500 meals each day for the student population. Since "chef" is part of Collins's job title, Irwin received complaints that Collins wasn't involved in day-to-day food preparation, even though it is a training and development position.

"I wouldn't pay \$45,000 for someone to cook muffins every day," Irwin said.

Change is slow in coming. Although the menu is healthier, Andrews Middle School Principal Tim Blake said reports aren't pouring in of suddenly energized students snapping to attention and learning in ways never before imagined.

"I don't know if there is a tangible effect, but every little bit helps," Blake said. "You definitely notice the healthier foods, and the kids are eating it."

Not everyone is easily converted. Lian Blake, who attends Andrews Middle School, still has her mother make a lunch for school every day. Not being a big beef eater, the alternative options aren't to her liking.

"She complains the vegetables are overcooked," said Elizabeth Blake, Lian's mother.

Collins's children - a 12-year-old and a 16-year-old both in Medford schools - used to have their lunches made at home as well, avoiding cafeteria food.

With the changes over the past year, Collins's children now buy the school lunch.

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