

Montgomery County

An Innovative Approach to Healthier School Meals

Summary

More than 25,000 students in Montgomery County are sampling more fruits and vegetables, new recipes, and eating healthier meals at school. The Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) program partnered with Ohio Action for Healthy Kids to sponsor a workshop in March 2012 for more than 70 school food service professionals. The goal was to present practical ideas for meeting the new USDA school meal requirements. As a result, four large school districts with more than 25,000 total students implemented workshop ideas for healthier menus.



Challenge

In Montgomery County, 24% of children ages 2-14 are considered to be obese; while only 28% of children eat the recommended amount of 5+ servings of fruits and vegetables a day. In the underserved communities of East and Old North Dayton, it is hard for families to access and afford fresh produce.

Significant improvements in childhood nutrition could be seen with the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which updates the school meal requirements for the first time in more than 15 years. Because many students eat one-to-two meals at school, this policy has the potential to impact healthy eating habits and childhood obesity. Although this policy is mandatory for schools participating in the National School Lunch Program, many schools have been slow to implement changes to the lunch menus. Barriers such as lack of administrative support, untrained food service staff, and tight budgets make the new policy seem overwhelming to some schools.

Your Involvement is Key

Immediate action must be taken to address these alarming unhealthy trends.

Reducing childhood obesity involves a long-term community commitment. The CHC program works to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes that are sustainable. Improving childhood nutrition through healthier schools meals is a step in the right direction, but involvement of parents, afterschool programs, sporting activities, and leaders in the community is critical for long-term positive outcomes.

Solution

To help overcome these barriers, CHC and Ohio Action for Healthy Kids sponsored a workshop titled "Simply Balanced: Nutritious School Lunches Made Easy." More than 70 school personnel from 21 school districts participated. Attendees heard from a Food Service Director from Cincinnati on their success with salad bars as a way to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. The Ohio Department of Education gave detailed information on the new school meal pattern requirements. The workshop ended with a cooking demonstration and tasting of several recipes that had been "kid tested and approved." Participants left excited about the ideas that could be implemented at their schools to meet the new meal pattern requirements.



Results

Several schools have been successfully implementing ideas from the workshop. Of those surveyed, 56% indicated they now serve only 1% or skim milk and have increased fruit and vegetable offerings. Thirty percent of those surveyed offered a tasting of new menu items with great success. Dayton Public Schools and Carroll High School (CHS) like this idea because students become familiar with new recipes before it is served as a meal.

Recipe “make-overs” cuts calories while preserving taste. Forty-four percent of those surveyed said they tried a recipe from the workshop. For example, CHS, Northridge Local School District, and Kettering City Schools tried the

southwest ranch dressing which mixes low-fat ranch dressing with salsa and a small amount of Tabasco Chipotle Sauce. Students have loved this on both salads and wraps.

“I talk to the kids about healthy eating, remind them to eat their veggies and fruit, praise them for doing so, and give healthy rewards. I also try to influence our parent group to provide healthy snacks/incentives.”

- Dayton Public Schools Second Grade Teacher

Future Directions

In 2013, CHC will continue to provide resources and offer technical assistance to help schools implement the new USDA meal pattern requirements. The workshop in 2012 focused on the changes to lunch menus, but additional requirements for breakfast must be implemented starting the 2013-14 school year. Providing a network for sharing success stories will help school food service staff smoothly and successfully transition to the healthier meal guidelines.



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