
Options Aplenty

Offering kids greater choice at lunchtime has hiked participation at one school district



At 5,300-student Ponca City (Okla.) School District, increasing the number of meal options for students has helped raise lunch participation to 96%, according to Jeff Denton, director of child nutrition.

“Kids eat differently than adults,” says Denton. “We might have a pizza item and chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy, but the students may get pizza and mashed potatoes and gravy. As an adult, we are thinking, ‘what are you doing,’ but for the child that’s exactly what they want, and we let them do it.”

The district’s menu is full of selections and build-it-yourself options. Eight entrées—two hot, three salads and three sandwiches—and 10 side dishes are offered daily. “We have a five-week cycle menu, but we never repeat an entrée in a month,” says Denton. “You’re not going to get chicken strips every Wednesday and pizza every Friday.”

Build your own: One of his innovative meal concepts is called “Layers of Flavours”. It consists of a base of hamburger, salad or rice to which students add toppings and sauces to create the flavour profile they want. This concept has been so successful that Denton implemented a build-your-own burrito kiosk in November. Students can select from a 10-inch tortilla, a taco bowl or a rice bowl. They can customize that with proteins like pork, chicken or beef and any of 10 toppings.

Denton says offering so many choices and allowing students to mix and match are the big reasons why the district has a 96% lunch participation rate. “Before Jeff came to the district, a good day on the reimbursable line at the high school was 130 meals purchased,” says Liz Glaser, assistant director of child nutrition. “Now the reimbursable line is 700 plus a day.”

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