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Study: Kids Will Eat Healthy School Food

By Steve Karnowski

The Associated Press, November 26, 2007

[Straight to the Source](#)

Maybe getting schoolchildren to eat healthy foods isn't a hopeless struggle. Bucking some common notions, a University of Minnesota study ([read the full study here](#)) has found that school lunch sales don't decline when healthier meals are served, and that more nutritious lunches don't necessarily cost schools more to produce.

"The conventional wisdom that you can't serve healthier meals because kids won't eat them is false," said Benjamin Senauer, one of three economists who wrote the study.

Previous studies have concluded that students prefer fatty foods and that healthier meals cost more to make, the authors noted.

The study, which appears in the December issue of the Review of Agricultural Economics, analyzed five years of data for 330 Minnesota public school districts. It looked at compliance with federal standards for calories, nutrients and fats.

When the researchers crunched all the numbers they found that schools serving the healthiest lunches did not see a falloff in demand.

While serving better meals does entail higher labor costs, the study found, that's offset by lower costs for more nutritious foods such as fruits and vegetables compared with processed foods. However, many districts need to upgrade their kitchens and train their staff to prepare these foods, the researchers said.

The study's conclusions rang true for Jean Ronnei, director of nutrition services for St. Paul Public Schools, which serves more than 46,000 meals daily. The district was held up by the authors as a model for others.

Ronnei said the percentage of St. Paul kids eating school lunches has increased in recent years at the same time the district has been offering more fruits and vegetables.

"That doesn't mean we don't have a hot dog on our menu. We do. . In our case it's a turkey low-fat hot dog," she said.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, said she was pleased to see evidence that schools can offer nutritious meals kids will eat without higher costs.

"I think people underestimate the willingness of kids to eat healthier foods," she said.

The study also pointed out that school districts are allowed to charge their lunch programs for indirect costs such as electricity or janitorial services for their cafeterias. The authors said that can be abused by cash-strapped districts charging their lunch programs high overhead; they recommended tighter limits on those charges.

Dr. Sandra Hassink of Wilmington, Del., a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Obesity Task Force, said that was an important finding. She said money allocated for nutritional programs should be spent on nutrition.

Alice Jo Rainville, a professor of nutrition and dietetics at Eastern Michigan University, noted that school nutrition programs have improved because of federal policy changes enacted in 2004, the last year included in the study.

Rainville said results in other states might not match those in Minnesota, but Senauer said he believes the situation is similar across the country.

"Everything we've done here, there's good reason to believe it's happening nationally," he said.

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