

Maximizing School Nutrition for our Students

Op/Ed

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School nutrition programs have been highlighted in the media recently; especially with the interest of the Obama administration, Congress's upcoming reauthorization of Child Nutrition Act, the release of the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) school nutrition recommendations, and the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) focus on health and wellness. The national attention on school meals has caused some to ask, "What's going on in our State?" As the number one school system in the country, Maryland has been making strides not only in academics, but also in nutrition and wellness. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) recognizes that a student's health and well-being is vital to their ability to learn and achieve academic excellence.

Last month, First Lady Michelle Obama, released her "Let's Move" campaign to fight childhood obesity. This past fall, the IOM suggested national changes to 14-year-old dietary guidelines for school meals. Efforts to combat childhood obesity and enhance the nutritional value of school meals have not come as a surprise to Maryland school lunch programs. Many school systems across our state have been strengthening their nutrition programs for a number of years.

For example, the IOM national recommendations include offering more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to students, while reducing the amount of sodium, saturated fat, and calories they consume. With the rise of childhood obesity and diabetes on national level, it made sense for schools to start using low-sodium mozzarella cheese and tomato sauce in food preparation, and switching to wholegrain breads, pizza crusts, and cereals. You will find these healthy changes already being made in many schools across Maryland.

In addition to supporting school nutrition programs, the USDA has expressed their increased interest in connecting local farmers and consumers and promoting Farm to School programs with the "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" campaign. Our state has made great strides in bringing more local products into school nutrition programs.

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All 24 public school systems participated in this year's Homegrown School Lunch Week where fresh, local produce was featured as part of the school lunch menu. This special week to highlight locally grown and produced foods is one aspect of Maryland's Farm to School movement. The Maryland Department of Agriculture and MSDE already have plans to continue the program for the upcoming school year.

There are several statewide initiatives that are intended to maximize the nutritional content of school meals, follow the IOM recommendations, and promote wellness. For example, 79 Maryland schools are participating in the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program this year. This program provides funding for produce to be served in schools as snacks. In addition, five school systems participated in the 2008-2009 Team Nutrition grant. The grant created School Wellness and Action Teams that implemented healthy changes in schools. Another 44 schools participate in the HealthierUS School Challenge, another USDA program that sets high standards for nutrition and physical activity in schools. Finally, the MSDE developed and released a School Wellness Policy Implementation and Monitoring Guide.

Maryland schools and the school food and nutrition service directors and staff have made a commitment to good nutrition and high health standards. These are important goals which contribute to a successful learning environment. I commend Maryland schools for their efforts to promote wellness, especially given the financial constraints of the school nutrition budgets. The investments we make in children's health and well-being are ones that pay off tenfold in the future.

The Maryland State Department of Education administers the school nutrition programs on a state level.

The nutrition requirements and program guidelines are issued by the USDA, the funding agency for the

programs. For more information about: Maryland's school nutrition programs, visit:

www.eatsmartmaryland.org; USDA's "Know your Farmer, You're your Food," visit:

www.usda.gov/knowyourfarmer; or "Let's Move," visit: www.letsmove.gov.

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