

Chef lessons for lunch ladies

Helping local schools improve students' meals

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At a workshop for 75 food service staff members in Raymond, participants laughed when instructor Liz Barbour asked them the last time their knives were sharpened. Many bring their own knives from home, as schools don't provide even a \$20 chef's knife. Instead they're using old butcher's knives for simple chopping and dicing, Barbour said.

"A knife is just one tool every cook needs and it's not even there," Barbour said. School food hasn't carried the greatest reputation through the years, but Barbour, a professional chef, is trying to help schools infuse more flavor and nutrition into their offerings. Barbour hosts several programs for food staff, including workshops on knife skills and how to prepare sauces and rubs. Barbour has worked in several high-end restaurants and owns the Creative Feast (www.thecreativefeast.com), a cooking training company. She served on the Wellness Committee at Hollis Elementary School, where the food director welcomed input to the school's lunch program.

"What we realized was that kids, while healthier food is being offered, kids weren't actually eating it," Barbour said, adding perhaps students weren't exposed to the healthy options at home and therefore were hesitant to try new things.

Young kids tend to be hesitant with new foods. And school officials have found that it's all the harder to get students to try new things when there's something familiar, like pizza, just a little farther down the line, Barbour said. On average children need to have a new food as an option seven times before they'll try it, which only makes it more difficult to expand children's palates. Kids already know what they like and dislike when they get to school, said Donna Roy, president of the New Hampshire School Nutrition Association. Roy said beyond familiarity, it's hard to prepare vegetables in a way that makes them more appealing than the cookies sitting nearby.

"When you're serving a chef salad with a whole-grain roll, fresh fruit and low-fat milk and the school store is selling candy or [there is] a bake sale, it defeats the purpose of a healthy lunch," Roy said.

In Pembroke, where Roy is the food service director, students have a fresh salad and fruit bar every day for students.

"It does give them a chance to select and try different things..." she said.

Food service staff members' goal is to get

kids to eat as many healthy things as possible with limited budgetary constraints and federal requirements. At the end of the day, that means they sort of have to get kids to eat something, whether they try broccoli or not.

By federal nutrition standards, school lunches must provide no more than 30 percent of calories from fat, and there must be less than 10 percent saturated fat in meals. Meals must provide one third of the recommended daily allowance of protein, vitamins A and C and calcium. School meals are served in age-appropriate sizes. School lunches cost between \$1.75 and \$2 each, Roy said. Since only about 17 percent of students' meals happen at school, the onus for introducing healthy food choices is more on parents than schools, but adding more fresh vegetables, whole grains and fruit to lunch plates could only help to broaden horizons, Roy said. "The real influence begins at home, not at school," Roy said.

Barbour is taking a simple approach to help food workers create more appealing offerings. At a recent workshop with food service staff in Raymond, Barbour began by showing attendees how to jazz up plain brown rice, first with olive oil, salt and pepper, and then by infusing fresh herbs, spices and vegetables. Food service officials were concerned about adding salt, but Barbour said a little can go a long way. "You can season while still being within a healthy range," Barbour said.

There are challenges beyond just cost and nutritional constraints before food service workers. School kitchens are designed to reheat food, not to cook it from scratch, Barbour said. Beginning in 2006, all U.S. schools were required to have a wellness policy that addresses food, physical activity and health classes. Schools began to make changes, like using whole-wheat breading on chicken nuggets and opting to bake rather than fry items. Subsequently, schools have added more whole grains, fruit and vegetables with each meal, Roy said.

Staff members know the processed chicken nuggets on every school's weekly menu aren't the healthiest option. If healthy food is available at school but not reinforced at home, then consistency is lost. That's where Barbour said schools can reach out to parents by providing information on different foods. Food is simply getting more attention now. A trip to the grocery store has grown more complicated. As Barbour said, just picking out eggs is full of decision-making — free range, caged, vegetarian-fed, brown or white.

"Everybody faces this now," Barbour said. "We just have to simplify and just find a way to gently bring ourselves to this healthier place." Barbour and a group of parents were working to introduce a tasting program at Hollis

Elementary School, where a group of students would taste a new offering each month and then report back to their fellow students.

Though guidelines are sometimes obstacles, Roy said schools benefit by having a more educated government in the food realm than they've had in the past.

"The food service staff is under-appreciated and they're a crucial part of our kids' wellbeing in school," Barbour said. "Many children don't eat breakfast, so lunch is their first meal. If they're not eating it, then the whole day, they're not functioning the way we all know they should be."

Just like teachers, Barbour said, cafeteria staff deserve training and resources to keep them up to date.

"Food is trendy like fashion," Barbour said.

"Trendy kids are right on the edge of that."

Barbour said she appreciates the time constraints food service workers must work within:

"I've got to be their cheerleader," she said.

With a little more flexibility and time, school food staff would be able to dress up food to entice students to try it and come back again. Barbour said more money isn't the answer; what's needed is a structure where creativity is allowed and promoted. When Barbour works with staff, she shows them a couple tricks to spruce up a dish.

"They need to be creative in how the staff is employed and the tasks they're doing," Barbour said. "That's where that training comes into play."

Roy said the more food service staff know, the better off they'll be in serving students.