

The Enterprise

West Bridgewater schools put nutrition on school menu

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Posted Nov 12, 2013 at 12:01 AM

Updated Nov 12, 2013 at 12:11 PM

When the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act was implemented in 2012, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture tightened up the nutrition standards for school lunches and breakfasts. Schools are required to serve more fruits and vegetables, trans fats have been eliminated and there are calorie and salt limits for meals. In West Bridgewater, the changes have been received with enthusiasm.

For third-grade teacher Karen Alves, a new perk of teaching is the improved school lunch program in West Bridgewater this year.

"As a teacher I am really enjoying the new, healthier lunches that are being offered," said Alves. "The chicken vegetable soup was one of the best soups I've tasted."

Alves is also a fan of the new sticker program encouraging kindergarten students to try new foods. "As a mom, I love having my kindergartener come home with her 'I tried it' sticker telling me all about the new fruits and veggies she's tried," said Alves. "Great idea."

The schools' new food services director, Ann Marie Grinder, is a licensed nutritionist who has launched a farm-to-school partnership with C.N. Smith Farms of East Bridgewater.

"Ann Marie is taking our food service program to a whole new level," said Superintendent Patricia Oakley. "Already we have seen an increase in kids and teachers buying lunches, and we use fresh produce from the farms, with more choices and more homemade dishes," said Oakley.

When the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act was implemented in 2012, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture tightened up the nutrition standards for school lunches and breakfasts to align them with dietary guidelines. This means schools are required to serve more fruits and vegetables, trans fats have been eliminated, and there are calorie limits for meals. Sodium is being reduced over the next couple years and by 2014-2015, at least 51 percent of the bread products must be whole-grain.

"As a nutritionist and a parent, I completely support these changes that were initiated last year," said Grinder, "but the concern for school food service directors has been increased food costs, reduced participation, and increased plate waste."

Grinder said the Massachusetts Farm to School Project has supported the partnership with C.N. Smith Farms, and provided "Harvest of the Month" posters and promotional materials.

"To date we have menued local watermelon, cantaloupe, several varieties of apples, nectarines, peaches, plums, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes and zucchini," said Grinder.

"Purchasing locally grown, seasonal produce encourages students to eat more fruits and vegetables because they look and taste great," said Grinder, "and if parents believe we are serving fresh healthy food they will be more likely to encourage their children to buy lunch."

The changes have caught the attention of even the youngest students.

"I like the fruit they have," said 8-year-old Alexander Altieri.

Classmate Dylan Yee preferred the new chicken tenders and variety of new foods.

"I like the new tacos with chicken and sauce and the sweet potato fries" said third-grader Lucas Guindon, while classmate Bryn Bouvier praised the oranges offered at lunch.

"I like the grilled cheese this year," said third-grader Lilly Martel. "It's different."

Grinder said the new menu features grab-and-go salads and whole grain wraps that have proved popular with students and staff.

"I am extremely positive about what I see happening at Rose L. MacDonald School during lunch," said Principal Linda Dubin. "The aspect of choice of fruits or vegetables instead of the serve-everything system has kids trying new things," said Dubin. "They have labeled foods in the line which helps kids to read and make decisions quickly," said Dubin.

High school senior Priscilla Martinez says she has noticed changes as well. "I've always bought lunch and this year they've definitely improved," said Martinez. "I tried the new cheddar broccoli soup and it was delicious," said Martinez.

"The nutrition guidelines for schools are getting stricter and stricter but by thinking outside of the box, our new director is getting kids to think and eat healthy with great-tasting food," said Oakley.