

“School lunches”

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Imagine you had one car to drive for 75 years. How would you take care of it? In particular, how would you fuel it?

When I talk with my kids about healthy food choices, I use the analogy of the car for their body because that seems to drive the point home in a tangible way.

We might all do well to ponder the vision of pattering around in the same old clunker several decades from now. Clunker of a *body*, that is. For, though we pamper and care for our cars, paying thousands of dollars out of our pockets each year to fuel and maintain them in peak condition for the relatively brief time we own them, when it comes to our own bodies, as a nation we fuel up on junk, run ourselves into the ground...and then wonder why we fall apart. Perhaps we need to re-evaluate our priorities.

The Obesity Epidemic

We’ve all read the statistics on America’s weight problem. The bottom line is: we’re fat and getting fatter. According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, physical inactivity and obesity caused 400,000 deaths in 2000, making it the number two killer in the U.S.

As Americans expand to ever-larger proportions, culprits are being fingered. Fast-food chains are a favorite target, being lambasted in a number of books and the recent documentary, “Super-Size Me.”

The school cafeteria is another hotbed of nutritional contention, as the obesity epidemic spreads to our children. The fact that American kids are more overweight than ever before is everyday news. This brings with it serious health issues. For instance, Type II diabetes, the so-called “adult onset” diabetes, is at an all-time high *in children*. Heart disease is showing up in kids as well.

Poor nutrition also has an impact on children’s ability to learn. “If you’ve been guzzling Mountain Dew and eating chips, you’re flying all over the place,” stated Mary Bruyette, a teacher at Appleton Central Alternative High School in Appleton, Wis. “I don’t think you’re going to pick up much in class.”

A New Paradigm

Appleton Central Alternative is a high school for at-risk students. It’s nutritional make-over began in 1998 with the school’s participation in a program called Peak Performance, funded through the Nutrition Resource Foundation, which was created by Paul and Barbara Stitt of Natural Ovens Bakery of Manitowoc, Wis..

Peak Performance educates teachers about nutrition and delivers a healthy morning snack of whole grain bagels and energy drinks to participating schools. Two Milwaukee area schools currently participate in the Peak Performance program—Nativity of the Lord in Cudahy and Nathan Hale High School in West Allis.

Through funding from the Nutrition Resource Foundation, Appleton Alternative expanded their healthy foods policy into the lunch program and school cafeteria, replacing vending machines with water and real fruit juice and adding a fresh salad bar, among other things.

The progressive nutrition policy has many school officials touting it as the reason some of the area's most behaviorally challenging students are doing better than ever. "We made the connection...when we started the healthier foods at [Appleton Central] Alternative High School, we noticed attendance rates had gone way up," stated Dr. Thomas Scullen, Appleton Area School District Superintendent. There were also no dropouts, suicides or weapons incidents in 2003.

The program expanded into the elementary and middle schools, making the Appleton district a model for the nation.

Vending machines are perhaps the biggest detriment to good nutrition in schools. Stocked with sugar-laden soda and foods fabricated with artificial coloring and partially hydrogenated oils, it's readily available at the push of a button. Joy Petit, public relations coordinator for Natural Ovens states that the simplest step to improving school nutrition is to remove the junk food from vending machines.

"When children have the option between lunch and the vending machine, they'll choose the vending machine," she said. "Most people say the kids will rebel if they remove the vending machines, but once you start offering healthy foods, kids like them." In 2004, the Appleton school district removed all junk food from all their schools.

One of the biggest arguments for keeping the vending machines is that the revenue from them funds sports teams and other school programs. Petit points out that the machines can stay—the contents can simply be replaced with healthier options, such as water, fruit, nutritious snack bars and more.

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in East Troy, Wis. is writing a report assessing the research that has been done on the behavioral impacts of healthy school meal programs. Scheduled for completion this fall, the first case study being included is on Appleton Central Alternative High School.

The research is being reviewed by an advisory team of heavy-hitters, including Dr. J. Michael Murphy, Associate Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School and staff psychologist in the Child Psychiatry Service at Massachusetts General Hospital and Eric

Schlosser, award-winning journalist and author of the best selling book “Fast Food Nation.”

Talkin’ About a Revolution

“When I heard of the terrible epidemic of obesity, I felt I had to do something,” stated Mary Ann Ihm, of Wellspring in Newburg, Wis., a non-profit educational organization focusing on wellness education, ecology, gardening and personal growth.

Ihm went to the West Bend school district last fall which feeds 5,500 children a day in 12 schools. She started meeting with administrators, food service representatives and principals. An advisory group comprised of parents at the various schools was created.

One of the first things the group tackled was reviewing where improvements could be made in the lunch menus. She’s made progress: this year the food service administrator insisted that brown rice be added to the food orders.

Taking on such a massive system can be daunting, but Ihm encourages others to get active. “I want parents to know that they can make a difference at their school,” she said. “Parents pay for the lunches and their kids eat it. I tell parents, ‘The power is in your hands.’”

Ihm offers some simple steps to make a difference:

- Meet with your food service administrators and suggest menu changes. Ihm invited Outpost Natural Foods nutritionist Judy Meyer to speak at a meeting to provide options.
- Investigate vending machine contracts and determine if they can be handled internally.
- Educate parents on healthy snacks to send to school with children. “Now *there’s* where you could really do away with sugar,” Ihm points out.
- Review where nutrition experiences could be added into the existing curriculum, such as science or health education.

Ihm has clever ideas to include the students in the process as well, such as conducting taste tests of the proposed vending machine items. “Once the kids say it’s good, they’ll all buy it,” she predicts.

One need only look at the statistics to know that Americans have a massive health issue with which to contend. In 50 years, will our kids be “driving” nutritionally deficient, obese bodies or mint condition ones, due to a lifetime of care and optimal fuel? Dramatic changes will be necessary to reverse the trend of obesity and poor nutrition for future generations. “We’re talking about a revolution,” Ihm said. “A food revolution. It’s going to take a lot of people.”

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