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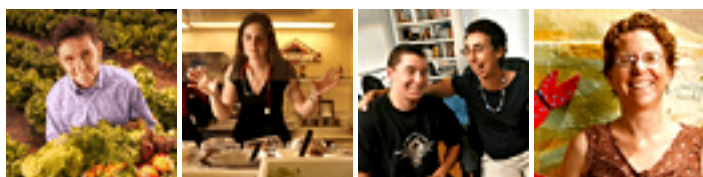
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[Obesity war's latest battlefield: the school cafeteria School nutrition is activists' passion How 4 dedicated people work to help Bay Area students eat right](#)

- [Stacy Finz, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Monday, August 28, 2006



There's a cartoon circulating among nutritionists these days: two really overweight parents -- one sprawled on the couch in front of the television with a soda resting on his belly, the other dishing up ice cream in the kitchen -- and their chubby daughter sitting on the floor, amid chip bags, pizza boxes and cookie wrappers. The caption reads: "Ahh ... it's nice to be home ... the only food they serve at school these days is good for you."

Schools weren't always citadels of health. For years, they were more like junk food coliseums. Now, as this school year begins, cafeteria menus are being scrutinized as closely as the curriculum in preparation for compliance with recently passed legislation to better students' diets. School officials from Santa Clara to Sonoma counties are planning inventive programs to rid their halls of high-calorie and fatty foods.

But for four people in the Bay Area, changing the way kids eat has become their life's mission.

-- Miguel Villarreal started working in the fields as a boy. At the time, bountiful crops meant backbreaking work. Now they mean food for hundreds of schoolchildren in Marin County.

-- Maria Mosquera was a medical resident when she began teaching Latino families in East Palo Alto how to cook their native dishes with healthful ingredients.

-- Nora Cody read everything she could get her hands on about trans fats and obesity. Now she calls students up to the front of their Oakland classrooms to measure -- one by one -- how many teaspoons of sugar are in a can of Coca-Cola.

-- Dana Woldow was a concerned mother first and is now bringing nutritious breakfasts to San Francisco, one school at a time.

Since 1980, the percentage of overweight young people in the nation has more than tripled, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The American Obesity Association attributes the growing number of cases of youth asthma, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, orthopedic complications and psychological disorders to bulging waistlines.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," said Howell Wechsler, director of adolescent and school health for the CDC in Atlanta.

"There's no question that schools can play a profound role" in fighting the epidemic, he said. "If all they do is get kids to eat more fruits and vegetables or reduce their saturated fat or trans fat intake, that's a major accomplishment."

Farm-fresh cafeteria food

Miguel Villarreal, director of food and nutritional services for seven Marin County school districts, including Novato and San Rafael, is trying to get kids to substitute jicama and carrots for their Snickers bars. And he's going straight to the farm to do it.

"It's not easy," Villarreal admits. "Just getting them to sample the food is an exercise."

He believes that if he brings it in fresh, the food will be richer in nutrients, and the kids will be more likely to eat it. So he's been working with Marin Organic, a group of local producers, on a Farm-to-School program.

Every Friday, Villarreal and his staff order fresh fruits and vegetables from local growers, including Paradise Valley Produce and Star Route Farms. Straus Family Creamery supplies yogurt for fruit and granola parfaits.

On Monday mornings, a truck rolls in with his delivery. All of it comes from less than 20 miles away.

"The carrots are coming out of the ground the day before we serve them," said Villarreal.

Every Thursday, Villarreal offers kids an organic salad. Three days a week, elementary school students can substitute an entree-size salad for anything on the menu. Middle and high school students can make the substitution five days a week.

The 47-year-old nutrition director is also creating a schoolyard farmers' market with donated produce from Marin Organic that otherwise might go to waste because it's not "pretty enough" to sell. The students can take bags of it home for free, along with recipes and a note about where it came from.

"Of all my ideas, this is the one I'm most excited about," says Villarreal, whose parents were migrant farm workers and raised him in the fields. "This way, the kids can teach the parents."

Translating health

In Santa Clara County, Maria Mosquera, a pediatric senior resident at Lucile Salter Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford, noticed that her patients were fat.

"Some were off the charts," she said.

So the 29-year-old doctor and her colleague, Heather Iezza, spent their summer in East Palo Alto conducting focus groups and classes on nutrition and exercise with Head Start parents. The mothers and fathers said they wanted to learn how to read food labels and understand portion sizes. They also wanted to make their traditional recipes more nutritious.

"Food is a huge part of my culture," said Mosquera, whose mother is Panamanian and

father is Colombian. "It's how we celebrate parties. It's how we tell people we love them. I would hate to see that taken away. So we have to figure out how to make it healthy."

These days, Mosquera spends a lot of time talking about the virtues of water and fruit. She explains that if a child has a bag of potato chips, a soft drink and a candy bar, that pretty much exhausts the recommended calories for the day. She's showing parents that calories and fat grams on labels are per serving and not for the whole package.

"It's confusing to a lot of people," she said. "Especially if they can't read English."

Mosquera translates labels into Spanish to show parents how to evaluate the food. She's taught them to bake their tortilla chips instead of frying them and has created a fruit salsa that can be eaten as a dessert.

"Our goal is not only to keep children from gaining weight, but to help the whole family learn about eating right," she said.

Mom with an agenda

Three years ago, Nora Cody became preoccupied with trans fat and its links to childhood obesity.

"I read every book I could get my hands on," said the 45-year-old mother of two and former director of a health nonprofit. "Then I sat my children down and explained to them that we were going to start eating differently. I taught them to read food labels, gave them guidelines and then turned them loose in the supermarket to make smart choices."

But protecting her own kids' health wasn't enough. When her son, Patrick, was in the fifth grade, she led his class at Oakland's Chabot Elementary in a discussion about nutrition.

Cody devised games the students could play and conducted experiments in which she'd have kids demonstrate how much sugar was in a can of soda and rub foods on brown paper bags to show how much grease they left behind. Before long, other teachers were begging her to teach their classes.

Soon she was instructing groups of 50 kids. And it didn't stop there. She taught park and recreation department employees from San Leandro and Emeryville how to lead similar classes for their camp programs. In January 2005, Cody was hired by the Oakland Unified School District to coordinate its wellness program.

She's spent much of this summer preparing for the implementation of the district's new policy to comply with a 2004 federal law. The legislation requires that all schools educate students about nutrition as well as provide healthful foods and opportunities for exercise.

"I see this as a real opportunity to push the health agenda," she said.

Breakfast crusader

Dana Woldow, a 54-year-old mother of three, knows the importance of a nutritious breakfast and also knows that many kids in the San Francisco Unified School District aren't getting one.

Two years ago, she proposed that Balboa High School start a Grab-and-Go breakfast program, which allows students to eat their morning meal during their first-period class. The breakfast would also be available to students receiving free or reduced-price lunches, which Woldow said is 61 percent of the student body at Balboa.

"I had read about Grab-and-Go and its success in other districts," she said. "I knew that it would be appropriate for our schools."

The staff at Balboa welcomed the idea, and by last school year, a pilot program was started.

"It turned out so well that we have received grants for more," said Woldow, co-chair of the district's Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Council. She said that in addition to Balboa, three other schools will get breakfast programs.

Woldow is also trying to implement a system in which students can just slide a card through a machine, which could be set up anywhere, for their food.

"It will get the food to so many more children, because you don't have to set up only in the cafeteria," she said. "It will save the school money by avoiding cash handling, and

it's an instant-auditing device. But, most of all, it will eliminate the stigma of everyone seeing your free-lunch card."

Movement on the rise

These four activists are getting support from a growing movement across the nation. But California in general, and the Bay Area in particular, have been leading the way.

In 2003, California was the first state in the nation to ban soda sales in elementary and middle schools. Three years from now, a state law will go into effect requiring high schools to get rid of them as well. By next summer, state law will require that vending machine snacks and cafeteria meals sold on California campuses during school hours have fewer calories and less fat.

Berkeley Unified wowed the nation with its Edible Schoolyard kitchen-garden, the hiring of health-food chef Ann Cooper, and its affiliation with the Chez Panisse Foundation's Alice Waters, the maharishi of the organic food movement.

At Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco, school officials got rid of the cookies and muffins and replaced them with fruit and granola bars about two years ago.

Sasha Lekach, 18, who graduated from the school in the spring, said her school meals were more cuisine than cafeteria, and she appreciated the quality of the ingredients.

"The most amazing part about my school lunches," she said, "was the freshness of all the food."

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Miguel Villarreal runs a program that brings farm-fresh foods to Marin County schools. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Dr. Maria Mosquera spent her summer teaching East Palo Alto parents how to read food labels and worked with them on cooking their traditional Latino dishes with healthful ingredients. Chronicle photo by Michael Macor



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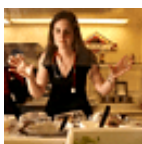
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Dana Woldow sits with her son, Max Schreiber, 17, a Balboa High School student. Woldow started the school's breakfast program. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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Nora Cody taught her children's Oakland elementary classmates about nutrition; the district hired her to do it for all the schools. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee



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