

LAUSD rolls out new batch of healthy menus

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After last year's failed experiment with exotic vegetarian fare, LAUSD has revamped its lunch menu with healthful dishes that officials hope will also appeal to the kids' palates. Instead of unexpected dishes such as hummus and chick-pea stew, cafeterias will be serving up pulled-pork sandwiches, hamburger sliders, whole-grain spaghetti and meatballs and the like.

"We want to teach kids about eating healthy and eating right," said David Binkle, interim director of the district's Food Services Division. "It should be part of their education that there's more to food than pizza and chicken nuggets."

The new entrees were introduced over the summer at LAUSD's three year-round schools and are set to debut districtwide on Tuesday. That's also the first day for the expanded Breakfast in the Classroom, which ensures that kids get that most important meal of the day.

Binkle said that early reviews for dishes like the Southwest chicken, rice and bean bowl -- "It's fabulous," he declared -- have convinced him the district is on the right track.

Meals from Cafe LA -- the name for LAUSD's lunch program -- are in line with the federal government's "MyPlate" dietary guidelines. These recommend that half of the meal be made up of fruits and vegetables, with the balance coming from protein and grains.

On the first day of school, breakfast will feature a bean and cheese burrito, orange juice and a piece of fruit. Lunch will include barbecued baked chicken, a whole-wheat roll, sweet potato wedges and an apple.

Milk -- low-fat, fat-free or fat- and lactose-free -- will be offered at all meals, another MyPlate recommendation.

For the first time, Binkle said, the meals will be served on recyclable paper products rather than environmentally troublesome polystyrene trays.

And while an estimated 80 percent of LAUSD's 600,000-plus students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, those who do pay full price will see a 50-cent increase.

Elementary students will pay \$1 for breakfast and \$1.50 for lunch, while prices at secondary campuses will go to \$1.50/\$2. Reduced-price lunches will be 40 cents, but breakfast will be free.

The price increase was needed so Food Services could break even this fiscal year after operating at a multimillion-dollar deficit the last several years.

Although the meal program is subsidized by the federal and state governments, the reimbursements don't cover all costs of making and serving 109 million meals a year.

Binkle said the district budgets \$116 million annually for food - 80 cents for each breakfast and \$1.20 per lunch. Salary and benefits for cafeteria workers total about \$144 million.

Los Angeles Unified got some advice in revamping its menu from California Food Policy Advocates, which works with districts statewide to provide healthful meals to children.

"It's a real balancing act," said Ariana Oliva, an advocate for the nonprofit group.

"You can offer more fruits, veggies and so on, but just because the meal is healthier doesn't mean that kids will eat

it," she said. "(Fast food) is ingrained in our culture, and it's a slow process to change that mentality."

Diets of junk food and empty calories have been blamed for the obesity epidemic.

In Los Angeles, more than 45 percent of fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders are overweight or obese, according to a study published in June by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

Conscious of the rising incidence of childhood obesity and health problems like diabetes, Los Angeles Unified has been trying for years to instill healthier eating habits in its students.

Officials long ago replaced greasy french fries with oven-baked sweet potato wedges, and served fruit rather than cookies for dessert. Soda and junk food were banned from campus vending machines, and flavored milk from the lunchroom.

Last year, the school board went a step further, approving a five-year, \$50 million contract to provide students with more meat-free meal options.

That effort backfired, as students complained about -- and simply refused to eat -- the sushi rolls, couscous and hummus with vegetable sticks.

"One boy poured milk onto his hummus," Binkle said. "He'd never seen it before and thought it was cereal."

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