Lunch Choices

How do you decide what to eat for lunch?

Would you eat a salad if you have to stand in line by the salad bar?

Would you take plain milk if the chocolate and strawberry-flavored milks are hidden behind it?

Would you take an apple if it's in a pretty basket?

These are just a few ideas suggested by researchers. They want students to make better, healthier choices.

Recently there has been a push to make school lunches healthier. Some schools were using a lot of pre-cooked and processed foods. They served foods like frozen pizza and chicken nuggets. These kinds of foods are easy to get. They tend to be cheap. Students like them. But they are often high in fat. They may be full of artificial (chemical) flavors, colors and preservatives.

School officials think that these are not the best kinds of foods for kids to eat. Students need fresh fruit and vegetables. They need foods with fiber. They need vitamins and minerals. Healthy foods provide lasting energy. They give the students the nutrients they need to focus. Healthy foods help students do their best in the classroom.

The federal government has rules about school lunches already. But requiring that carrot sticks and fruit are provided doesn't mean that students are actually eating it.

"In elementary school, we had to take some vegetables from the salad bar," says Becky Lee, now in 7th grade. "My friends would use the carrot sticks to make towers. I don't think anyone ate them."

"Last year, we started requiring every student to take a piece of fruit," says principal Susan Ishikawa. "But most of it just ended up in the garbage."

"It doesn't count as nutrition if they never eat it."

Researchers began to look for ways to get students to actually eat the healthier options.

Some schools started by reducing the unhealthy choices.

"We took out the soda machines this past summer," says Tessa Sanchez. Mrs. Sanchez is a teacher at the middle school. "There were a lot of disappointed students when school started. I was surprised to realize that there were students who didn't know what to get for lunch. All the soda gives them is sugar and caffeine. I think it was a good decision to take the soda machines away."

Vending machine options were also updated. Granola bars replaced candy bars. Baked chips

replaced fried. Dried fruit, nuts, and beef jerky rounded out the choices.

One teacher jokes that these changes have helped her too. She's lost five pounds this school year.

In some schools teachers are no longer allowed to give students candy in class. Several districts no longer allow students to bring cupcakes on their birthdays. "Students can celebrate their birthdays without having junk food," explains one principal. "Also, when food is brought from home, it might not be safe. Maybe a student in the class has a severe allergy to nuts. Food coming from a home where there are nuts could be dangerous for that student.

Restrictions have worked to some degree. Students who buy lunch at school are getting a healthier lunch.

However, more students are now bringing food from home. This way they can have whatever kinds of food they want.

Is it possible to get the students to want to eat the healthier food?

Researchers want to understand why kids make the choices they make. They want to know what will make kids want to make better food choices.

In the meantime, schools are on their own to figure out what works.

"We tried something new," says Principal Ishikawa. "When school started, we picked out several well-liked 4th and 5th graders. We had them choose lots of fresh foods. They had salad and carrot sticks. They all had fruit. Then they sat at tables with the younger students. Those littler kids could see the big kids eating healthy foods. After two days, the younger students started eating the same foods. Then the older kids went back to making their own choices. They went back to eating with their own friends. The amount of fresh fruit and veggies they ate went down. But they were still eating more than they had before."

"We want our kids to want to be healthy."