

If You Serve It, They Will Come

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The old adage when it came to school lunches has long been that kids love most that which is the worst for them to eat.

Given the epidemic rise in rates of childhood obesity and diabetes, this would certainly seem to be the case. However, a surprising new study published in the Winter 2007 issue of *Review of Agricultural Economics* found quite the opposite to be true. Kids are turning up their noses at the old standbys of tater tots and Sloppy Joes in favor of apple slices and turkey dogs. Furthermore, serving more nutritional lunches under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) does not correlate to an increase in production cost.

Graduate student Barbara Wagner and her colleagues in the University of Minnesota's Department of Applied Economics evaluated five years' worth (1999-2004) of financial, nutritional and demographic data from 330 Minnesota school districts. The researchers were looking at compliance with federal standards for calories, nutrients and fats in an effort to determine why school districts have difficulty meeting nutritional standards for lunches served under the NSLP.

Interestingly, they found that the school districts which served the healthiest lunches saw no decrease in the number of lunches students purchased. As the researchers noted, "The nutrition variable, which was not statistically significant, is of primary interest. Although previous qualitative analysis suggested that student demand will fall as nutrition increases, this relationship was unsupported by this analysis. Nutrition is not associated with the quantity of school meals demanded."

Benjamin Senauer, one of Wagner's co-authors, told *CNN News*, "The conventional wisdom that you can't serve healthier meals because kids won't eat them is false." Furthermore, the analysis showed that those healthier lunches do not need to incur a tremendous increase in cost. Once again, those districts that served the healthiest lunches did not show an increase in production costs. In essence, more nutritious meals did not cost significantly more to produce. The researchers noted:

"The finding that nutritious meals do not cost more to produce again challenges conventional views. In fairness, this finding may be affected by the exclusion of capital equipment costs. In interviews, food service managers indicated that significant short-run capital investments were necessary to change to more nutritious meals, even though the long-run costs of producing nutritious meals were not higher."

Interestingly, the city of New York also has found that students will reach for healthier items if they are offered. In an Oct. 17, 2007 article in the *The New York Times* discussing efforts to get more locally grown food into school cafeterias, David Berkowitz, who runs the city's school food program, noted that the school district has gone through several million bags of locally grown apples since they were first introduced in 2005. Furthermore, public school children in NYC are eating four times as many apples as they did before the program began.

Children in St. Paul, Minn., also have proven themselves capable of selecting healthy food items, if offered. Jean Ronnei, director of nutrition services for St. Paul public schools, says the percentage of children eating school lunches has increased since the district began offering more fresh fruits and vegetables. The researchers cited the St. Paul school district as an example for others to follow.

Overall, Wagner and colleagues had two main suggestions based on their findings:

- Establishing a target calorie range with a maximum as well as a minimum would provide schools with a clear, consistent message concerning both nutritional quality and the quantity of calories served.
- The finding that healthy meals do not cost more to produce, combined with the suggestion that one-time capital investments may be necessary, suggests that government assistance to correct nutrition deficiencies should take the form of one-time grants for production and staff training upgrades rather than increased recurrent reimbursement rates.

References

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FEBRUARY 2008