

A tale of two lunches

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DENVER - It was the best of meals; it was the worst of meals.

It was cheese tortellini topped with steamed zucchini, a whole wheat roll, organic soy milk and whole fruit; it was fried chicken nuggets, mashed potatoes and gravy, a pre-packaged blueberry muffin, chocolate milk and a fruit cup.

It was \$3.10 per child; it was \$1.40 per child.

This is a tale of two lunch periods, both in the same school cafeteria in Denver's Stapleton neighborhood. From 11 a.m. to noon, the cafeteria houses children from The Odyssey School, a charter school serving grades K-8. From noon to 1 p.m., it houses children from Westerly Creek Elementary School, a DPS school that currently serves children from ECE through third grade.

The two schools occupy opposite ends of the same building, and share the cafeteria. But the lunch menus at the two schools could not be more different.

At Odyssey, where roughly a third of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, the meals are catered by Revolution Foods, a company launched in the San Francisco Bay area in 2006 and that today serves lunches at more than 100 schools in California, Colorado and the mid-Atlantic area around Washington D.C. Every meal is homemade and includes fresh fruit and vegetables, a healthy carbohydrate and a lean protein.

Revolution uses locally-grown organic produce whenever possible, the milk is hormone-free, and the foods are never fried or microwaved. The meals are also free of artificial preservatives and sweeteners.

At Westerly, where very few of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, the children eat standard DPS cafeteria fare, which meets basic dietary guidelines, including no more than 30 percent of calories coming from fat and less than 10 percent coming from saturated fat.

At DPS, lunches served to elementary students last week averaged 707 calories - slightly higher than the target of 634 calories - and averaged 21 percent fat, according to the district's Food and Nutrition Services Web site.

"They make an effort. Some days are better than others," says Westerly kindergarten teacher Ann Christensen, of the district's effort to provide students with better-quality, more healthful meals than in the past. "We haven't had any complaints from parents about the food. Most of us grew up eating in school cafeterias, so it's not like we expect a lot of ambience."

Christensen has a unique perspective because while she eats with her Westerly kindergarteners, her son eats with his classmates - at Odyssey. And rather than pay for the more expensive Revolution lunches, she packs her son's lunch at home, just as she's done since he first started to school.

"It's nice to have edamame for lunch, but they can live without it," Christensen says. "Parents just want their children to have a good lunch. I encourage my kindergarteners parents to pack their lunches at home because kids do better with foods they're familiar with."

In contrast, Odyssey parent Kim Neal is ecstatic about the lunches that her son Colton, a second-grader, eats every day.

"I like the portions. I like the quality. This is just better food than what the school offered before. He wouldn't eat the lunches that I packed for him, and he WILL eat this," she says.

Odyssey's switch to catered lunches grew, in part, out of a school project last year. Seventh- and eighth-graders studying nutrition investigated a number of options for how school lunches could be improved. Among the companies they investigated was Revolution Foods.

"They wrote letters to me and to our board, explaining how Revolution compared to other companies," says school Principal Marcia Fulton. "The kids were thinking. Yes, the food is more expensive. But we asked our parents if they'd be willing to pay more to get this quality of lunch, and they said yes."

At the same time, the Donnell Kay Foundation (a funder of EdNews) began brokering conversations last fall between Revolution Foods, local charter school, health advocates, education officials and food service providers to put together a pilot program in Colorado to allow charter schools to contract with the company to provide school lunches.

Bureaucratic roadblocks involving rules about federal reimbursement for students who qualified for free or reduced price lunches threatened to derail the plan, but state policies were changed last spring to permit the program to move forward. Read this EdNews story for background on the issue.

This fall, Revolution is providing lunches at 18 Colorado charter schools. Most of them joined together to form the Flagstaff School Food Authority, which functions to process reimbursement claims. Flagstaff Academy, a charter school in Longmont, does most of the actual processing of paperwork, with the support of the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

"We are ecstatic to be here," says Nick Saccaro, vice president and general manager for Revolution Foods. "We've developed phenomenal partnerships, and we couldn't be happier." He predicts the number of schools that contract with Revolution will hugely expand as parents begin to see what sorts of meals are turning up on their children's lunch tables.

Unlike a traditional school cafeteria, which serves as many children as want to eat on any given day, Revolution provides only the number of meals each day that are ordered in advance. Parents choose from among a choice of two hot entrees or a salad each day. All meals include whole fruit and whole wheat rolls. A week's worth of meals are usually ordered in advance.

"There's no last-minute 'Can I get a lunch today?'" says Fulton. "There's less spontaneity. Parents have to be trained to be thinking a week in advance to put in those orders."

Students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches still eat for free or at a reduced price at Odyssey, even though the meals cost substantially more than regular school lunches. A little over a week into the new school year, Fulton isn't sure just how it will all balance out, and history is no guide. But she trusts it will.

She says that last year, many of the students simply wouldn't eat the food being served in the cafeteria, even if they did qualify for free lunch. It seems to her that more economically disadvantaged students are taking advantage of the Revolution lunches.

"Those who can't afford to pay full price every day, but don't qualify for free or

reduced-price lunches, we encourage them to buy fewer lunches and supplement those they buy with foods from home," Fulton says. "The fact is, this is just much, much healthier than most of what they'd bring from home."

The proof, if would seem, is in the pudding. Westerly principal Jill Corcoran acknowledges that most of her students bring their own lunches. Going through the school lunch line takes a long time and lunch periods are short.

In contrast, most Odyssey students eat hot meals ordered through Revolution Foods.

"I like this better than bringing from home," says 10-year-old Seamus as he tucks into his tortellini. "After seeing what it looks like, my dad said I could order lunch from school. I didn't eat cafeteria food last year, and now I do. This is real, actual food."

"The other lunch was so bad, I wouldn't eat it," said Tom, a 10-year-old Odyssey student. "But this is almost a 10 out of a 10."

A group of fifth-graders all agreed that so far, only the chicken hot dogs have failed to meet their taste tests. Given that reaction, it's unlikely chicken hot dogs will make a return to the menu.

"The other powerful piece is the feedback loop," Fulton says. "They're here every day talking to kids, asking them 'Do you like this?' Revolution is interested in making sure kids like what they eat. They'll make recipes from the kids' input. They want kids to love what they eat and to provide a healthy experience for them."

By Rebecca Jones www.ednewscolorado.org

Colorado Schools served by Revolution Foods:

Lotus School for Excellence, Aurora, <http://www.lotusschool.org/>

West Denver Prep <http://www.westdenverprep.org/>

Flagstaff Academy, Longmont <http://www.flagstaffacademy.org>

The Odyssey School

Mental Health Center of Denver, <http://www.mhcd.org/>

Westgate Community School, Northglenn <http://www.westgateschool.org/>

Denver School of Science and Technology <http://www.scienceandtech.org/>

Horizons k-8 School, Boulder <http://horizonsk8school.org/>

Denver International School <http://www.dischool.org/>

Colorado High School Charter, Denver http://www.chscharter.org/main_v04.htm

AXL Academy, Aurora <http://www.axlacademy.org/>

Jefferson Academy Secondary, Broomfield <http://www.jajags.com>

Lincoln Academy, Arvada <http://lincolnacademy.net/>

Knowledge Quest Academy, Milliken <http://www.kqatrailblazers.org>

Global Village Academy, Aurora <http://www.globalvillageacademy.org>

Littleton Academy <http://www.littletonacademy.net>

American Academy, Castle Pines <http://www.americanacademyk8.org>

Mackintosh Academy, Littleton <http://www.mackintoshacademy.com>

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