

## School Meals Get a Nutrition Makeover

When I first heard of a new position opening with the Food Service Management department at GST BOCES, I was very intrigued. What does a Food Service Specialist do? I wondered. As it turns out, A LOT! In the job for only a month now, I am gaining great respect for all of the people who make it their priority to provide our school children with healthy meals and snacks. Feeding kids, especially in today's fast food society, is an enormous challenge and it gets even harder when there are government and state guidelines to follow. Add to that the number of schools that GST BOCES now serves, and you'll begin to see what an enormous endeavor school food service is. With 15 school districts receiving food management services from GST BOCES, we are currently serving approximately 17,000 children each day. If a student buys a lunch from the school cafeteria every day from kindergarten through graduation, that student will have eaten 2,301 lunches!

The steady increase in the rate of childhood obesity has had a major impact on school nutrition. Food service personnel now have the health and wellness of students to consider when designing menus and deciding which snacks to offer. With the government placing firm restrictions on the amount of calories, fat grams, and sodium per meal, recipes have been modified to comply with the new guidelines. Most deep fried items like french fries are a thing of the past. The macaroni and cheese recipe is now significantly lower in fat and calories. All milk is now either skim or 1%. Salads and dressings are now made with reduced fat mayonnaise and pizzas are served on whole grain crust. Sandwiches come with bread or rolls that are a minimum of 50% whole grain. More fruit and vegetable choices are offered than ever before. In addition to that, the New York State School Nutrition Association has made recommendations for the sugar, salt and fat content of snacks, so schools have had to eliminate many popular items. Gone are many of the cookies, snack cakes and bags of chips that were of a high caloric density, and in their place are healthier alternatives that are lower in fat, sodium and sugar. Sodas and candies will not be found in school cafeterias either. The beverages offered are mainly milk, water and 100% pure fruit juice.

Things have definitely changed since I was a kid eating in school. I once had questions about the nutritional integrity of school meals but now I can speak with assurance that local schools are headed in the right direction. It's exciting to see that *Health Matters* when it comes to food served at school.

Parents, we need your help too. *Encourage* your children to make healthy choices at school. *Offer* healthy foods at home. Most importantly, if your kids see you *make healthy choices* they will start to do it too. So to all parents and students, the food in the school cafeteria may look a little different than it used to, but give it a try. Your personal health and wellness will reap the benefits from the healthy changes you make. Each month I'll make suggestions on how you can do just that. Until next time, remember to "*Choose Sensibly*".

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