

## **Some healthy lessons in the school cafeteria**

**Lynnfield students get merchandise for spurning junk food**

**By Bruce Muhl, Globe Staff, 3/7/2004**

LYNNFIELD -- Fifth-graders file into the middle school cafeteria here and are immediately confronted with a choice: To the left is a traditional lunch consisting of a sub sandwich, cookie, banana, and drink. To the right is something called an imove lunch, featuring low-fat chicken nuggets, green beans, a roll, Jello, and milk.

Surprisingly, the vast majority of children go to the right, opting for the more nutritious imove lunch, perhaps because it comes with points that can be redeemed for everything from T-shirts (20 points) to backpacks (60) to fleece pullovers (100) to skateboards (160).

Using a program developed by its food wholesaler, Lynnfield Middle School is trying to combat child obesity by treating its students as consumers, offering financial incentives to pick healthier foods as they go through the lunch line. The healthier items are marked with imove stickers. Two points are awarded for an imove lunch; one for each imove a la carte item.

"It's a good way for kids to eat healthier," said 11-year-old Courtney McQueen, who is trying to stockpile enough points to get a sports bottle. But the incentives can only do so much. McQueen and her lunch companion didn't touch the green beans on their plates.

School systems across the country are mobilizing to fight obesity. The standard approach has been to restrict what's sold, trying to offer more nutritious foods while eliminating junk food and soft drinks. But it's a delicate balancing act, trying to find healthy foods children will eat while making enough money to keep self-supporting food service operations in the black.

Some school systems have successfully promoted the consumption of healthier foods and drinks by charging less for them and more for unhealthy items. Lynnfield officials are pricing their regular and imove meals the same, but trying to steer students toward imove items with the lure of prizes.

The concept is the brainchild of Costa Fruit & Produce of Charlestown, a food distributor that has seen its sales of junk foods soar over the last 20 years and wants to see if something can be done to stem the tide. Company officials say they receive no financial benefit under the program.

The imove menu includes chicken Caesar salad wraps, stir fry, pasta and broccoli salad, fresh fruit, carrot sticks, and yogurt. It also includes such kid favorites as chicken nuggets (albeit a low-fat, low-sodium version), lasagna, and pizza. The big difference is that pizza is never offered with a side of french fries; instead, its high-fat content is moderated with sides of green beans and yogurt.

"We're trying to teach kids that, in moderation, things like chicken nuggets and pizza aren't forbidden," said Maureen Kelly Gonsalves, a dietician doing consulting work for Costa on the imove menu.

An underlying goal of the imove program is to get children thinking about the ways food can affect their health. Several who were interviewed last week clearly hadn't given it much thought, but there was the occasional surprise.

Bryan McMorrow, 11, ate the imove lunch (including the green beans) and didn't even bother to get a punch card stamped. He said he keeps losing the cards, or they get stuffed in a pocket and end up going through the wash. He doesn't seem to care, though. "I'd just rather eat healthy than get points," he said.

No more than 25 percent of the calories in any imove lunch or snack can come from fat. Moreover, snacks cannot have sugar as their primary ingredient and must have some nutritional value. Baked Lay's potato chips, for example, are low in fat but have almost no nutritional value, so they don't qualify.

The imove standards are more rigorous than those of the US Department of Agriculture. The USDA requires that no more than 30 percent of the calories in a week of school lunches can come from fat. The USDA has no standard for snacks.

Costa supplies the imove menus, nutrition education handouts, point cards, and prizes, including the mountain bike to be featured in an upcoming drawing. The food wholesaler also supplies the imove posters that adorn the cafeteria walls, which urge the students to "Choose health. You've got the power to choose."

Manuel R. Costa, president of Costa Foods, said the challenge has been to offer nutritional foods that students want to eat. "I can put out the apples and the fruit salads, but if they don't pick them it doesn't do any good," Costa said. "Imove makes it cool to eat them. It's hip to eat them."

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C., said the point system employed by Costa takes a marketing technique long used by traditional food manufacturers and turns it on its head.

"Usually points are used to encourage children to eat unhealthy food as opposed to healthy food," Wootan said.

Dr. David Ludwig, director of the obesity program at Children's Hospital in Boston, said he applauds any move to counter the \$10 billion spent by food manufacturers to influence children to buy fast food, soft drinks, and junk foods.

But he questioned the imove focus on fat calories. He said several studies have found that fat alone is not a major determinant of body weight, and suggested the focus should be on serving healthful fats and carbohydrates. A packet of almonds, for example, is very high in fat calories and wouldn't qualify as an imove snack. "But it's a good type of fat and it's very satiating," he said.

Nancy Antolini, the food service director in Lynnfield, is thrilled by the response to imove so far. She said parents have been very supportive and the total number of lunches being sold at the middle school has increased dramatically, from 85 to 100 on a typical day last year to about 200 a day since the imove program began in January. She sold 185 imove chicken nugget lunches last week.

The program is an extension of changes Antolini had already been making. She had pulled the candy Fruit by the Foot off the shelves, inciting a protest from a handful of students who demanded it be returned. It wasn't. She also stopped selling very popular Lay's barbecue potato chips because the fat content was so high. She is also replacing white bread with wheat.

But it's often more expensive to serve better food. The wheat hamburger buns she plans to start ordering cost 3 cents more per bun than the white ones. She worries that she may have to increase the price of the lunch from \$2 to \$2.25 to keep food quality high.

Antolini hopes to extend the imove program to Lynnfield's two elementary schools next year, but doesn't plan to take it to the high school. She said older students, even by eighth grade, are pretty entrenched in their ways.

Linda Shea, director of the Costa division that services school districts, said Arlington and Gloucester have signed on to imove.

*Bruce Mohl can be reached at [mohl@globe.com](mailto:mohl@globe.com).*

© Copyright 2004 Globe Newspaper Company.