

Boston Area Schools Offer Rewards for Eating Produce

By Jim Offner, The Packer

BOSTON — It's a produce purveyor's dream come true.

Schoolchildren are lining up in their cafeteria for meals laden with fruits and vegetables.

And nobody is forcing them.

In January, Boston-based Costa Fruit & Produce Co. launched a pilot program at a middle school in nearby Lynnfield that offers students rewards for choosing high-nutrition meals and snacks.

The Kidfit program, which Costa officials hope to have in place in Boston, Providence, R.I., and other school districts around New England by next fall, provides marketing tools and healthy food products to foodservice operators.

"We try to educate them and give them incentives to buy healthy products," said Mike Scuderi, Costa's marketing director. "We have posters and point-of-sale materials throughout the cafeteria. We're generally just trying to encourage an atmosphere of healthy eating and overall wellness. It's becoming kind of the culture of the cafeteria and school foodservice."

Children going through their cafeteria line can choose specially labeled items that are sold as meals or a la carte.

The company provides posters, branded imagery and nutritional information to catch kids' attention.

"It becomes the focal point of the line, so they get pointed in the right directions," Scuderi said.

Menu planners and recipes ensure that all Kidfit meals and snack items are nutrient dense, have less than 25% calories from fat and meet nutritional guidelines mandated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Items that bear the seal include fruit cups, salads, melon chunks and vegetable sticks, said Manny Costa, president and chief executive officer of Costa Fruit & Produce.

A la carte items include carrot dips, sliced apple dips and salad "shake-ups" that come in cups.

As students go through their cafeteria line, they earn points for choosing appropriate products. They keep track of their points by having a redemption card stamped by the cashier. Twenty stamps fills a card, and the student can obtain another.

“The healthier they eat, the more points they earn,” Scuderi said. “The more points they earn, the greater the reward.”

The program will culminate with a raffle, wherein participants submit all of their completed cards and a winner is drawn and awarded a mountain bike, Costa said.

Other rewards for regular participants include items like sportswear and sports equipment.

“You have to remember that you’re dealing with kids, and they need incentives,” said Nancy Antolini, foodservice director for the Lynnfield School District.

Many of the school’s 600 students participate, she said.

“To be honest, I think the younger kids, the ones in fifth and sixth grades, are catching on quicker,” she said. “Kids in seventh and eighth grades tend to already have their habits set more. But every week there’s more and more participation.”

Antolini agreed to participate in the pilot program after having learned about Kidfit at the Massachusetts School Foodservice Association’s food show.

Costa, a school foodservice distributor for more than 20 years, served as a sponsor of the association’s Wellness Challenge, donating \$7,000 to support the program, which was a contest among cafeteria workers designed to induce them to exercise and set a positive example for students.

“Workers across the state had competitions between different school systems,” Costa said. “That was kind of the preamble to the whole program.”

Costa brought in Maureen Kelly Gonsalves, a registered dietitian, to design meals.

The pilot program is, for the moment, limited to just one school.

“We just didn’t want to take on too much by going to the latter ages too soon,” he said.

Big districts, such as Boston, are waiting to participate, Costa said.

“We really wanted to have a limited rollout in the spring and the big rollout in September, after we’ve signed people up now through the spring and summer for the program,” he said. “We service Boston, and they are interested in the program. We actually presented them the concept a while back. They thought it was a great idea. It was just a matter of us working out some of the logistics.”

Elizabeth Pivonka, president of the Wilmington, Del.-based Produce for Better Health Foundation, which has its own pilot program in Florida.

“I think it’s a terrific approach,” Pivonka said. “It’s somewhat modeled after the program we’ve been testing in Florida. We’re seeing that kids like fruits and vegetables and that they need to be prepared in such a way that they’re not overcooked.”

The reward system is particularly appealing, Pivonka added.

Similar programs are under way in Oregon and Kansas, as well, she said. However, they are based more on the PBH model of making fruits and vegetables available to students and educating them on the products’ benefits as alternatives to junk food rather than a pure rewards system.

Costa said that these types of programs signify a trend that can’t be ignored.

The Kidfit program won’t likely stop in New England, Costa said.

Scuderi said that a Southern California school food distributor, Leabo Foods, had already contacted Costa about bringing the concept into its marketplace.

“News travels fast,” he said.