

Costa Delivers “Kid•fit” Nutrition Program

By MIKE BERGER, Yankee Foodservice 3/10/04

While everyone is talking about obesity and nutritional food, Costa Fruit & Produce of Boston has come up with a unique school food service program that rewards children for making healthy nutritional choices for meals and snacks with sportswear or sports equipment items.

“Kid•fit” provides marketing tools and healthy food products to school food service operators and the reward items are paid for by Costa Fruit & Produce.

According to Michael Scuderi, marketing director of Costa, the Kid-fit meals are nutrient dense, have less than 25 percent calories from fat and meet nutritional guidelines mandated by the USDA. The program also includes posters and nutritional information that educate students and reinforce the Kid•fit mantra of “Choose Health.”

In late January, middle school students in Lynnfield, Mass., were the first to participate in Costa’s “Kid•fit” program and two months worth of the pilot program have proved enthusiastic responses. “From what we have heard, the meals taste good and the kids look forward to lunch,” said Mr. Scuderi.

As students go through the cafeteria line, they earn points for choosing healthy foods that bear the Kid•fit label. They keep track of their points by having a redemption card stamped by the cashier. The healthier food choices earn more points. The points earned go to rewards such as sportswear and sports equipment that promote an active and healthy lifestyle.

For example, rewards could include sports and accessories such as hats, T-shirts, jackets, sport bottles, backpacks, pedometers, and watches. Sports equipment items include skateboards, mountain bikes, bats and balls.

For example an entrée of either a Chicken Caesar Wrap, Chicken Stir-Fry with Rice, Tuna Salad On A Roll, Pasta & Broccoli, or Chicken Burrito earn two points. An a la carte item of a grab and go salad or healthy snack is worth one point. Students who collect 10 to 20 points can receive a T-shirt or sports bottle. A pedometer is worth 40 points, sports watch is worth 120 points, and a skateboard is worth 160 points. Any student who has a filled out redemption card is eligible for the grand prize raffle drawing of a mountain bike.

“Our students are very excited about this program and lunch participation has increased significantly,” said Nancy Antolini, food service director for Lynnfield schools. She agreed to participate in the pilot program after learning about Kid•fit at the Massachusetts School Foodservice Assn. Food Show. Costa Fruit & Produce was the primary sponsor of the MSFSA Wellness Challenge, donating \$7,000 to support the program.

“It starts by stepping up to the plate,” said Linda Shea, director of Costa’s School Pro Division “It’s time for manufacturers and distributors to become more socially conscious and offer solutions for this ongoing crisis.”

“We have made a commitment to join the fight against child obesity and to contribute to the healthfulness of children,” said Manny Costa, president and chief executive officer of the company. “It’s not just an obesity issue,” said Mr. Costa. “Kids that aren’t properly nourished don’t perform as well as they should physically or academically.”

To establish Kid•fit nutritional guidelines and menu options, Costa is working with Maureen Kelly Gonsalves, M.Ed. R.D., a registered and respected dietician in the food service industry. Mr. Scuderi said other challenges are to bring in less processed food but still make the program cost effective for the operator.

There are five main components to the Kid•fit program including an extensive product line, menu planners, wellness information, merchandising materials, and a rewards program. Categories include fresh fruits and vegetables, prepared salads, snack items, entrees, beverages, and grab and go items.

Costa will be working to partner with schools to establish pilot programs. For more information, contact Linda Shea at sheal@freshideas.com.

Costa's manufacturing division, "Fresh Ideas" produces more than 500 preservative free, value added fresh cut fruits and vegetables for the Kid•fit program. As a broad line service provider, Costa supplies 3500 frozen food and grocery items and offers a complete line of fresh products that include fresh fruits and produce, fresh seafood and dairy, value added fruits and vegetables, and prepared salads. Costa has been servicing the food service industry for more than 50 years.