

School lunches moving toward healthier choices

Schools will resume for many of the nation's youth over the coming weeks and one change parents may notice is healthier meals offered in their children's school meals program.

The passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in December 2010 helped usher in more changes to what children are served at school, according to a Kansas State University school nutrition expert.

"There has been a real push to increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables served to children and a move to purchase local foods from local farmers," said Jeannie Sneed, head of the department of hospital-

ity management and dietetics in the university's College of Human Ecology. "Many schools offer lots of choices so that children can select foods that they enjoy."

Congress reauthorizes child nutrition programs every five years, which precipitated passage of The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The legislation included many provisions that improved access to nutrition assistance programs, required compliance to new meal pattern and nutrition standards, emphasized school wellness policies, provided grants and instituted a series of other reforms related to meal pricing and food safety.

A new menu pattern will be implemented this year for the School Breakfast Program and the National Lunch Program. The reforms will be phased in over the next 10 years. The new meal pattern emphasizes the consumption of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and provides both minimum and maximum calorie levels for children at various grades. Increasingly lower sodium levels also will be phased in.

During the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years, half of all grains served must be whole grains. By 2014-2015, all must be whole grain.

"We won't see any traditional

white bread in the school meals program," Sneed said.

Fruit servings will increase to five cups per week as part of the new meal pattern. Another requirement will be for five cups of vegetables to be served weekly. All flavored milks will have to be fat-free and low-fat, unflavored milk can be served. The number of times starchy vegetables such as corn and potatoes can be served has also been reduced substantially.

The importance of reforms in meals programs cannot be underestimated, according to Sneed.

"There has been a trend toward increasing obesity in children and

an increase in metabolic diseases such as diabetes, so it is important to provide healthy choices for children in schools," she said.

Despite the extensive reforms, Sneed said many schools have done a great job at providing nutritional options for children.

"Many schools employ dietitians who evaluate the foods served to make sure they meet nutritional requirements for children," she said. "Further, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has made concerted efforts to improve programs."

In 2011 the USDA awarded Kansas State University funding to establish a Center of Excellence

for Food Safety Research in Child Nutrition Programs. The center is working to provide the scientific basis for decisions related to food safety in the program.

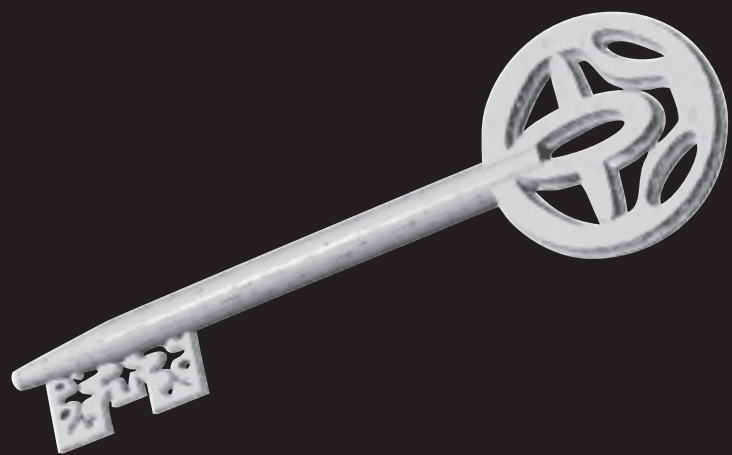
But reforming school meals programs is only part of a process that can help curtail childhood obesity, Sneed said.

"Children only eat a small percentage of their meals each year at school," she said. "It's important for parents to take responsibility to learn about nutrition and provide their children with healthy choices. Parents also need to model appropriate eating behaviors for their children."

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