Student Nutrition in Arlington Schools
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In 2010, the Federal Legislature passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. A major goal of this act is to serve the students in our schools healthy meals and snacks, which in turn, could play a part in reducing preventable health concerns such as diabetes and heart disease that are associated with child obesity. In order to implement this law, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) developed new requirements for school child nutrition programs based upon independent research and recommendations provided by the Institute of Medicine. As a result, a five (5)+ year plan is being implemented to make changes to the meal program in all federally funded programs providing food to children. The main changes that have been made are an increase to the use of whole grains, the amount and variety of vegetables offered, the implementation of limits in caloric, sodium and fat and regulations related to snack foods sold to students.

It has been a challenge across the country to make these changes as schools and food vendors have worked to develop products that meet these requirements and that students will eat. We are succeeding! This year all grain-based foods offered will contain at least 50% whole grain; all of the cafeterias in the Arlington Public Schools have produce/salad bars from which students are able to choose a variety of fruits and vegetables, and menus have been developed that are age appropriate for serving sizes. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Child Nutrition Services (CNS) reviewed our Child Nutrition program this past year. The review was positive indicating that we are in line with the requirements. This was very exciting news for us!

The main change for the 2014-15 school year is implementation of the breakfast program changes and the Smart Snacks in Schools regulation. We fully implemented the breakfast program last year so that is already in place. The goal of Smart Snacks in Schools program is to make sure that the snacks sold to students are healthy for students. This means that all foods and drinks sold to students at school during the school day (midnight to half an hour after the school day ends) will meet specific “standards for fat, saturated fat, trans fat, sugar and sodium as well as promote foods that have whole grains, low fat dairy, fruits, vegetables or protein foods as their main ingredient.” (OSPI CNS) This includes foods sold a la carte in the cafeterias, vending machines, student-run programs and fund-raisers. It does not include concession sales at evening activities. Research has begun to find new products that meet the Smart Snacks in Schools requirements and movement toward implementation has taken place.

Overall, the changes have been positive but not fast. Anytime change is implemented there are challenges: meaningful change generally takes time, thought and planning. We are beginning to see students eat a variety of fruits and vegetables and to take only what they will eat. The vendors are getting a handle on ways to make whole grain foods more palatable for students and students are getting more accustomed to the flavor and texture. It is a challenge, but one worthy of our efforts because the current and future health of our children is worth it!