School nutrition: A kid's right to choose

As the federal government plans to improve nutrition in school lunchrooms, it's important to look at what works, and what doesn't.

By David R. Just and Brian Wansink

February 3, 2012

Last fall, Los Angeles took a hard line on school nutrition. In an attempt to mold better eating habits in kids, the Los Angeles Unified School District eliminated flavored milk, chicken nuggets and other longtime childhood favorites. But instead of making kids healthier, the changes sent students fleeing from school cafeterias. There have been reports of a thriving trade in black-market junk food, of pizzas delivered to side doors and of family-sized bags of chips being brought from home. Garbage cans are filling up with the more nutritious food, even if kids aren't.

The lesson? We cannot simply bully kids into eating healthful foods and take their lunch money.

As the federal government prepares to launch a similar, though less sweeping, effort to cleanse lunchrooms of troublesome foods, it's important to analyze what works — and what doesn't — in trying to get kids to eat more nutritious food.

Under new nutrition standards announced last week by the USDA, fruit and vegetables will have to be offered with every school cafeteria meal. Additionally, some traditional lunchroom favorites, such as 2% white milk, will be eliminated; tater tots and pizza will be severely restricted, and may not even be recognizable.

The federal government should think twice about this approach. As the Los Angeles example makes clear, trying to teach students to eat more healthful foods by removing other choices can backfire. When children (or even adults) feel restricted or forced into a decision, they naturally rebel.

Consider the example of two schools we studied in Utah. One required that all school lunches include the vegetable or fruit of the day; the other served the fruit or vegetable only when it was requested. Children at the first school were served 60% more fruit, but we found that kids only consumed 1% more than those at the school where it was optional. Pushing healthful foods on the unwilling only makes garbage cans fatter and
creates expensive waste.

Nationally, many schools have tried to demonize and ban processed foods, soft drinks, pizza and chocolate milk. Though such dramatic efforts can have rhetorical and emotional appeal, they are probably not achieving the goal of guiding children to better eating habits.

Choice is important to children, and having the ability to choose can have profound effects on behavior. For example, our research at Cornell shows that when given the choice of either carrots or celery, 89% of children will choose and eat carrots. But if kids are instead given only carrots without a choice, just 69% will eat them. Instead of taking away choice, a better solution is to guide a child's choice.

At one school we studied, kids had a choice of eating in the regular cafeteria line or in a healthy express line stocked only with healthful sandwiches, salads, fruits and vegetables. We found that simply placing chocolate milk in that line along with the other foods attracted far more kids, and therefore decreased the less nutritious foods (such as French fries and cookies) on cafeteria trays by 28% and increased healthful choices by 18%. This happened because we kept chocolate milk, but also because kids had a choice. They didn't have to abandon school lunch altogether if the healthful fare on any particular day was not an acceptable option.

Oftentimes very subtle changes can have a big effect on behavior. We found that moving fruit out of stainless steel bins and into an attractive fruit bowl near the cash register increased sales by 103%. Using the simple principles of behavioral economics can move the mountain of child nutrition.

Moreover, kids are happy with the result. The majority of children fail to notice the small changes that lead them to eat more healthful foods. And even if they do notice, they appreciate that it was their choice to take the fruit or vegetable.

Children will choose their food no matter what we place in the lunch line, even if the choice is simply not to eat. If we impose too big a change, kids will simply bring their lunch from home or have pizza delivered at the side door. Or they may skip lunch altogether and wait for an after-school junk food binge.

In an environment where choice rules, we need to make the more healthful choice the more attractive choice, not the only choice.

Behavioral science shows this can be done at either no cost or very low cost. Heavy-handed measures might be effective at putting nutritious foods on the lunch tray, but it is crucial to remember this: It is not nutritious until it is eaten.

Better nutrition and happy kids at a low cost? That sounds like a smarter lunchroom.

David R. Just and Brian Wansink are professors at Cornell University and co-directors of the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs.

Copyright © 2012, Los Angeles Times