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Potato Chips, Cola, and Sweets, Oh My!

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Sixth-grader Ticheyla Strong is sitting in her public school cafeteria munching on a grilled cheese sandwich.

If that seems an unremarkable image, consider this: The sandwich is made of freshly baked semolina bread and organic cheddar cheese, and it is being served with steamed broccoli, roasted potatoes, homemade tomato soup, and a salad bar that offers fresh, crunchy vegetables and nuts with a dollop of cottage cheese on the side.

It hasn't always been this way. "Last year the food was nasty," Ticheyla says of the fare at Bridgehampton's public pre- K-12 school on Long Island. "Now there's different stuff - better stuff."

But very few US public-school students are sitting down to the kind of lunch served in Bridgehampton.

As the US Congress prepares to do its first review of school-lunch legislation in five years, critics are charging that school lunch in the US is a mess - and in some cases it is only getting worse.

"The past 10 years have been really bad," says Antonia Demas, director of the Food Studies Institute, a nonprofit children's-health advocacy group in Trumansburg, N.Y. The only good news, she says, is that the way kids eat in school "is getting so bad that people are finally paying attention."

And increased scrutiny of what kids eat during the school day has had an impact. Growing public criticism of practices like hiring fast-food chains to cater school lunches and allowing soda- and candy-filled vending machines to operate - unchecked - in school

settings has caused at least a handful of school districts to either ban or limit such practices.

But such districts are in the minority. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta says that 98 percent of public US high schools and three-quarters of middle schools have vending machines.

The government's school-lunch program is also the target of much criticism. With an annual price tag of about \$10 billion the program helps to feed 27 million public school children meals balanced according to government guidelines.

But many observers remain unhappy over a system that allows almost 30 percent of total calories to come from fat, counts French fries as a vegetable, and too often offers unappetizing canned vegetables as the only truly "healthy" option.

Some advocacy groups are urging Congress to take a hard look at a program they believe has utterly failed to keep pace with what experts today know about nutrition.

The School Lunch Act of 1946 was originally spurred largely by alarming reports from physicians who found too many young World War II recruits to be underweight and malnourished.

A free or subsidized meal at school, it was assumed, would help put meat on young bones.

But dietary considerations were fewer at that time. "Then we were just worried that kids would get enough to eat," says Amy Lanou, nutrition director for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine in Washington, an advocacy group that holds school-lunch programs partially responsible for the growing number of over-weight US children. "Today we know a lot more about nutrition."

There are also concerns about the dual mandate given to the US Department of Agriculture, the government agency that oversees school meals.

School-meal programs exist not only to feed hungry schoolchildren, but also to create markets for certain unwanted US food commodities.

That explains why items such as processed pork balls - using pieces of the pig that most restaurants don't want - and apples with no taste often end up on school menus.

But few major changes are expected in the school lunch program this time around. Some experts argue that it's not necessary. The government, they say, is already moving in the right direction.

"School lunches are pretty good and could be better - and are getting better," says Jim Weill, president of the Food Research and Action Center in Washington, who points

to studies showing that the fat content of school lunches has dropped significantly in recent years, and that it is scheduled to drop even further.

In addition, others say, school-lunch innovation is not an item of interest for the Bush administration, which appears to be focusing most intensely on tightening eligibility requirements for students who currently qualify for free or reduced-price lunches at school.

Real change will only come at the grassroots level, "one school at a time," says Ann Cooper, executive chef and director of wellness and nutrition at the Ross School in Easthampton, N.Y., and a self-described school-lunch reform advocate.

At individual schools there's plenty of interest in change, she insists.

"I have public-school administrators calling me all the time and asking" how to improve school meals, she says.

Ms. Cooper recalls in particular the superintendent who called her and moaned that lunch at his school that day comprised two soft pretzels and an apple - and that it was considered a complete and healthy meal according to government nutritional standards.

One school to take a stand has been Aptos Middle School in San Francisco. There, concerned parents and educators got together and decided to ban all sales of soda, chips, and candy from the school. They then focused on creating healthier and more appealing cafeteria offerings such as sushi, turkey dogs, and chili.

"We just stopped" sales of junk food, says Laura Hurley, assistant principal. "The kids weren't crazy about losing soda and chips, but they've adapted."

There were also logistics to work out, says Ms. Hurley, like finding a cost-effective way to bring in sushi from a local restaurant, but the trade-off, she adds, has been improved after-lunch behavior and concentration in classes.

Cooper has also found a proving ground for some of her ideas about reforming public-school lunch in the Bridgehampton school.

There she works as an outside contractor - the school has no kitchen facilities - providing breakfast and lunch meals that are fresh, made of organic products, and sometimes almost gourmet in quality.

Each meal costs a few cents more than last year's, which came from another public-school cafeteria, but Bridgehampton administrators say the trade-off in terms of quality has been well worth the added expense.

Of course, the students have needed some coaching in order to accept strange new dining experiences, such as scones and chicken tandoori, and not all have been converted.

"I'd rather eat normal food," scowls sixth-grader Paschelle Street, and several students laugh at the idea of zucchini as a pizza topping.

But a whole tableful of fifth- and sixth-grade boys eagerly shout: "Salad bar!" when asked what's best about this year's lunch fare, and a solemn group of second- and third-grade girls are quick to point out that their new diet is better for them and more slimming as well.

"Cauliflower, boiled fish, cottage cheese," second-grader Mikeyia Stanfield recites enthusiastically when asked what new foods she has tried at lunchtime this year.

Old habits, however, die hard.

"Broccoli is great," she says as she dips a large green spear into a pool of familiar-looking red stuff. "It's good for you - and it's great with ketchup."

What kids want

Nutrition may be on the minds of parents and educators around the country, but the top five foods students reach for at lunch haven't changed:

1. Pizza
2. Chocolate chip cookies
3. Corn
4. French fries
5. Chicken nuggets

Source: American School Food Service Association