



Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia

- 166,000 students in a diverse district near Washington, DC
- 19 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals

Approaches

- Influence food and beverage contracts
- Establish nutrition standards for competitive foods
- Make more healthful foods and beverages available
- Adopt marketing techniques to promote healthful choices
- Limit student access to competitive foods

Words of wisdom

“Our vision drives all the decisions for our program: The Office of Food and Nutrition Services, Fairfax County Public Schools, will assist in developing excellence in each and every student. In an atmosphere that values diversity and human resources, we will be the best Food and Nutrition Services program in the nation by providing students food and nutrition knowledge, skills, and values they will need for a healthy body in an ever-changing global society.”

—Penny McConnell, MS, RD, SFNS, Director, Food and Nutrition Services

Key changes and results

Reported by Penny McConnell, MS, RD, SFNS, Director, Food and Nutrition Services

Since the beginning of the foodservice operations in the 1940s, Fairfax County has had a strong foundation in nutrition. This means that they have not had to make major changes to insure that students have access to healthful food and beverage options.

- Healthful vending and à la carte options are part of Fairfax’s nutrition vision. Since the 1980s, the district has had a strict competitive foods policy: “Nothing can be sold in competition with the school foodservice program during the entire school day.”

- All vending in Fairfax schools is done through the Department of Food and Nutrition Services – in partnership with the school administration. The department determined that it was necessary to manage its own vending in order to preserve the nutrition integrity of its program. [See Mission, Vision and Nutrition Integrity, page 259.]
- The Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) vending program (\$3 million in yearly sales) includes 1,200 machines in 239 schools and offices, and 14 community recreation centers for afterschool sales. The program, which constantly searches for healthier products to vend in its machines, has introduced baked chips, fruit/granola bars, milk, and 100% juices.
- FCPS foodservice has developed its own brand, Energy Zone, complete with a mascot (EZ Bear), official colors (fuchsia, teal, and black), and label for all its packaged products (such as EZ sandwich wraps and EZ water). For example, Energy Zone bottled water has become a business itself with 40,000 cases sold in 2002.
- Nutrient analysis and ingredient information are integral parts of the Energy Zone offerings. The nutrient analyses (calories, protein, and fat) of the most popular items are posted in the cafeterias. All other details are available upon request. FCPS is currently working with its suppliers to address trans fatty acid content in products.

Keys to success

- **INNOVATIVE ATTITUDE:** Be fluid and flexible to meet the challenges of a diverse student body and a constantly changing food marketplace.
- **CUSTOMER FOCUS:** Remember that students eat with their eyes; they will eat what they are served if it is attractive, colorful, and offered in a friendly atmosphere.
- **POSITIVE PARTNERSHIPS:** Everything depends on partnerships and rapport with students and their parents, the school community, and the food industry.
- **NUTRITION INTEGRITY:** Always “walk the talk” to provide customers with the most nutritious choices possible. As the Office of Food and Nutrition Services motto says: “We Talk Nutrition. We Serve Nutrition. We Teach Nutrition.”

Description

The FCPS District is the twelfth largest in the United States. The Department of Food and Nutrition Services is a nonprofit \$50 million business, serving approximately 150,000 customers daily at 238 schools, as well as day care centers, private schools, senior citizen programs, School-Age Child Care (SACC) programs, and Family and Early Childhood Education Programs (Head Start). Lunch and à la carte items are available in all schools, and breakfast is offered in 154 schools.

Director Penny McConnell is constantly searching for innovative ways to meet the needs of her customers and to help them be healthier. The Energy Zone brand itself was designed to be kid-friendly and to promote positive choices at the same time. According to McConnell, a good rapport with the food industry is essential if you want to offer students the healthiest possible choices at a reasonable price. For example, she had a student request for calcium-fortified juice. At first, she was able to find just a couple of 100% juices with calcium. Now, after working with the supplier, all FCPS juice products are calcium-fortified.

Education is an important part of the Energy Zone concept. Foodservice complements classroom lessons with kids' cooking classes, and the EZ Bear is working hard to promote physical activity.

Future plans

- Continue to be recognized as the voice of child nutrition for the district by working with other departments and being visible at all times.
- Collaborate with school administrators to find alternative solutions to problems (such as trying to feed 1,200 high school students in one lunch period).
- Become a more effective nutrition resource for families by providing nutrition columns for parent newsletters and expanding website information for families.
- Examine vending options in depth to investigate what new products are available or could be developed.

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Fayette County Public Schools, Lexington, Kentucky

- 32,000 students in Kentucky's second-largest city near the center of the State
- 38.6 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals

Approaches

- Influence food and beverage contracts
- Make more healthful foods and beverages available
- Adopt marketing techniques to promote healthful choices

Words of wisdom

“Keep on plugging and don't get discouraged. Bring a non-emotional, well-spoken attitude to the table and seek first to understand where other people are coming from. Keep speaking your truth, over and over and over again.”

—*Anita Courtney, MS, RD, Lexington Fayette County Health Department*

Key changes and results

Reported by Anita Courtney, MS, RD, Director of Health Promotion, Lexington Fayette County Health Department

- Utilizing a competitive bidding process, the Fayette County School District negotiated new vending contracts in June 2003 that increased both revenue and healthy options for students.
- Terms of the new beverage contract include the following:
 - a) The vendor will pay \$900,000 for the exclusive right to all beverage sales in the school district for 5 years. This is an increase from the \$500,000 specified in the previous contract.
 - b) The number of “healthy beverages” will increase from 21 percent of machine offerings to 72 percent. “Healthy beverages” will include water, 100% juice, and sports drinks (with 40 percent less sugar and less than half of the calories of soft drinks).

- c) Soft drinks will sell for \$1.25; juice, water, and sports drinks for \$1.00. Commission to schools for “healthy beverages” will be 50 percent versus 47 percent for soft drinks.
 - d) Donated products for school activities will consist of 50 percent “healthy beverages” and 50 percent soft drinks (compared to 100 percent soft drinks in the previous contract).
 - e) Images of young people engaged in physical activity will replace company logos on beverage machine facades. The company will also sponsor a President's Fitness Challenge-Field Day and offer five mountain bikes as prizes.
- Terms of the snack vending contract include these provisions:
 - a) Percentage of items meeting established nutrition criteria for a healthy snack (no more than 6 grams of fat per serving and no more than 40 percent added sugar by weight) will increase from 1 percent to 40 percent of items vended.
 - b) Healthier snacks will be priced at 60 cents, other snacks at 65 cents. Schools will receive a 9 percent commission on snack sales compared to no commission in the previous contract.
 - Changes were in evidence during the first weeks of the 2003-2004 school year, just 3 months after the new contracts were signed. Healthier options now in machines include choices from 100% orange juice to low-fat, calcium-fortified snacks.
 - Health Department staff promoted the healthful changes by visiting random high school classes and distributing free healthful snacks to students, giving a short promotion and doing a presentation on vending in health classes.
 - They formed a Student Advisory Vending Committee to obtain student feedback and conducted an end-of-year survey with principals for their input.
 - During the first half of the 2003-2004 school year, the school district earned \$13,000 more in revenue than the previous year. Bottled water and healthier snacks were particularly popular. Although some students expressed disappointment at the higher price for soft drinks, many students, parents, teachers, and administrators say they are glad to have more healthy choices in the machines.

Keys to success

- **JOINING HANDS INSTEAD OF POINTING FINGERS:** Keeping the focus on creating win-win situations to balance revenue to schools and healthful options for students
- **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:** Involving different players with different perspectives and different skills, especially someone with expertise in the food industry
- **INTENSIVE FOLLOW-UP:** Monitoring to insure that vendors adhere to contract terms

Description

The dramatic changes in Fayette County schools' vending contracts were the result of both hard work and serendipity. For 2 years, nutrition and education professionals had worked to establish State standards for vending in schools. Although State legislation did not pass, the "junk food bill" became a household phrase in Kentucky. This heightened level of awareness helped create support for a different process when the Fayette County School District was in a position to negotiate new beverage and snack vending contracts.

The serendipity, or "dumb luck," came in finding parent and district PTA vice-president Roger Kirk at a meeting where a Health Department nutritionist, Anita Courtney, spoke about the issue. Mr. Kirk, who had 20 years of experience in the food industry, worked with the district's auditor to design a request for proposal (RFP) that awarded competing companies points for what they did to shift sales to healthier items. Approximately half of the bid points were based on revenue and half were awarded for ways that the companies proposed to encourage the sales of healthier items, e.g., by offering more nutrient-rich items, lower prices for healthy items, and strategies to promote active lifestyles.

This innovative RFP design greatly strengthened the school district's negotiating position and allowed competing companies to use their marketing expertise to become part of the solution. Mr. Kirk's attendance at meetings with industry representatives was also key to the success of the process. Having someone who spoke the language, understood industry psychology, and knew how to "play the game" was a significant asset to the district.

Compromise was also important to the process. For example, "healthy beverages" were originally defined as only water and 100% juice. However, during the negotiations, sports drinks were added to the "healthy" category. Since sports drinks have 40 percent less sugar and less than half of the calories of soft drinks, it was a compromise the district could accept.

Future plans

- Organize vending committees in each school (with student, teacher, and parent members) to promote the healthier options and to monitor machines.
- Track sales and revenue to ensure that healthier products are acceptable to students.
- Use student focus groups to find the best strategies to market healthier foods, including possible presentations for middle and high school health classes.
- Work with vendors to maximize the number of healthy options available for vending.
- Work with school principals to place machines selling the most healthful options in the most prominent locations.

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Richland One School District, Columbia, South Carolina

- 26,000 students in South Carolina's capital city
- 62 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals

Approaches

- Influence food and beverage contracts
- Make more healthful foods and beverages available
- Establish nutrition standards for competitive foods
- Limit student access to competitive foods
- Use fundraising activities and rewards that support student health

Words of wisdom

“Nutrition is central to our children’s physical and academic development. Therefore, it is essential to academic achievement.”

—*Ronald L. Epps, District Superintendent*

Key changes and results

Reported by Imogene F. Clarke, Director, Student Nutrition Services

- Richland One developed and implemented a district-wide Student Nutrition Policy that prohibits the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNV) throughout all district schools: in vending machines, snack bars, school stores, and concession stands and as à la carte offerings in the foodservice program. The policy specifically prohibits access by all students to carbonated beverages and prohibits access by elementary students to vending machines.
- The policy establishes nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold or served at school. They may contain no more than 40 percent by weight of sugar or artificial sweeteners and 8 grams or less of fat per 1-ounce serving. Juice products must contain 20 percent or more of real fruit or vegetable juices. A list of acceptable snacks was provided to district schools.

- The policy prohibits the sale of FMNV and encourages the sale of either non-food items or food items that meet the new nutrition standards for class fundraisers. [See Student Nutrition Policy, page 267.]
- While the nutrition policy was being implemented, cafeteria menus were revamped to become more appealing to students. New choices include combo lunches with Richland's own brand of chicken sandwich, and food courts in several high schools that offer eight daily menu choices.
- After implementation of the Student Nutrition Policy, à la carte sales in the cafeteria dropped by 30 percent. However, increased revenue from greater participation in the school lunch and breakfast programs more than made up for this shortfall. À la carte sales are now beginning to increase, as new healthier choices, requested by students, are also being offered.
- The sales in cafeteria vending machines also dropped initially, when healthier, more expensive beverages were placed in the machines. By contrast, the sales of water and flavored water have increased significantly.

Keys to success

- **A guiding philosophy** that "student health is not for sale"
- **Strong leadership** from school district administration and broad support in the school community
- **Student input**, which has helped improve cafeteria options by involving students in menu selections

Description

In July 2000, the Richland One School District was poised to sign a lucrative, exclusive contract with a soft drink company. Just before the scheduled signing, Superintendent Dr. Ronald Epps watched a television special on the prevalence of type 2 diabetes in South Carolina school children. As a result, Dr. Epps changed his mind about the contract.

To develop support for a district-wide nutrition policy, Richland One used the concerns of parents and staff at Crayton Middle School as a test case. They involved community health leaders in designing a presentation on the importance of a wholesome diet on the long term health and academic

performance of young people. Their idea was that if students in the district supported the change, the school board and individual school administrators would as well. This is, in fact, exactly what happened.

Student input and support have been important to successful changes in Richland One. Middle and high school nutrition advisory councils and the superintendent's student advisory council (representing student government leaders for all high schools) met with the administration and shared their concerns about the meal programs. The students asked for more variety in the cafeterias and requested food that looked good and tasted good as well. They also suggested that any needed changes should be made during the summer months, if at all possible. They wanted to come back from summer vacation with everything in place.

The staff of Student Nutrition Services worked hard to make student suggestions a daily reality in district cafeterias. They worked with vendors to get the food items that students liked at taste tests. They continue to meet with members of the nutrition council and to bring back their concerns for action.

School funding remains an ongoing challenge, mainly because Richland One had been using an exclusive beverage contract as one means to generate revenue for school programs. The district, however, remains committed to its Student Nutrition Policy and to the principle that the health of its students is not for sale. Richland One has received national and local recognition for its policies, including the 2001 Outstanding Contribution to Health Education Award from the South Carolina Association for the Advancement of Health Education.

Future plans

- The district is currently testing bottled milk in vending machines. Initial taste testing showed that flavored milk was a big hit in high schools.
- The district's annual food fair will be expanded and refocused. Schools, and the community, will be invited to participate in a Healthy Food and Lifestyle Expo at the Carolina Coliseum on the campus of the University of South Carolina. During the Expo, students and parents can sample new food and beverage items being considered for school offerings and vote for their favorite choices. The Expo will also include representatives from local hospitals, colleges, and other agencies offering health information, screenings, and services. District schools have been invited to participate by sharing student work related to health and nutrition.

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Vista Unified School District (VUSD), Oceanside, California

- 25,000 students on the southern California coast, near San Diego
- 45 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals

Approaches

- Influence food and beverage contracts
- Make more healthful foods and beverages available
- Adopt marketing techniques to promote healthful choices

Words of wisdom

“Remember the saying ‘If you can't beat em, join em?’ At Vista Unified School District we did just that, and we have created a successful partnership within our district community. Looking through the eyes of our competition, we thought how could we do this and do it bigger, better, and with more profits. How can we share the profits with the schools and offer better choices, better nutrition, and better prices?”

—*Enid Hohn, Director of Child Nutrition Services*

Key changes and results

Reported by Enid Hohn, RD, Director of Child Nutrition Services

- After a careful review of existing vending options, programs, and contracts, the VUSD Child Nutrition Services (CNS) became the sole provider of vending services on the campus of Vista High School on July 1, 2001.
- CNS eliminated all candy and chips, and replaced them with crackers, pretzels, granola bars, corn nuts, peanuts, dried apricots, and beef jerky. They also brought in food machines with new options: bagels with cream cheese, cereal and milk, yogurt and granola, fresh fruit salad, shaker salads, fresh veggies with light ranch dressing, whole fresh fruit, and muffins.

- Soft drink machines were removed and replaced with display beverage units featuring a variety of types of milk, four different types of 100% juice, smoothies, bottled water, sports drinks, and three types of soft drinks.
- In these beverage machines, milk, juice, and water were placed at eye level and sold for \$1.00. Sports drinks and soft drinks were at the lower levels and sold for \$1.25.
- During the first year, only 12 percent of the beverage sales was from soft drinks; 68 percent from water and sports drinks; and 20 percent from milk and juice. Toward the end of the second year, the inventory of soft drinks was depleted and never replaced. There were very few student comments and few teacher complaints.
- Since CNS took control of the vending machines, students have access to healthier foods, and **the school makes significantly more money than under contracts with vendors.**
- The school site (Vista High School) received over \$20,000 in commissions and bonuses. This amount was more than double what the district had received in the previous year, before CNS took over the vending operation.
- In the first full year of business, the CNS vending operation grossed \$187,000. As the department captured new business, sales in all other foodservice operations on the campus increased as well.
- During the second year of operation, the school site received over \$25,000 in commissions and bonuses and at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, it received over \$31,000.
- As a result of making changes in the VUSD vending program, the nutrition integrity of the Child Nutrition Program has been restored. The long-range effect is that the students have healthier choices throughout their school day. Students who previously had made the choice not to eat all day and students who did not want to stand in long lunch lines are now eating. This change has contributed to their overall good health and readiness to learn.
- The initial investment made by CNS, mainly to obtain the vending machines, was approximately \$100,000. It took the department only 30 months to recoup its initial investment.

- CNS recently moved vending machines into the middle schools through use of a third party supplier (products and machines are specified by CNS). Bottled water and milk have both been popular with the middle school students.
- At one middle school CNS has converted an old cafeteria room to a fitness and nutrition center. The department purchased 12 stationary bikes and a dance machine. Students have access to the fitness equipment at breakfast and during lunch. The center has been very popular with both students and staff.

Keys to success

- **SUPPORT:** Without the wholehearted backing of the superintendent, this partnership would not have succeeded. The superintendent directed the secondary principals to work with the child nutrition department.
- **MARKET RESEARCH:** Focus groups and student surveys with various student groups including athletes, club members, student leaders, and the vegetarian club
- **CUSTOMER SERVICE:** New attractive machines with a good selection of items, fair prices, and fast service

Description

The VUSD CNS was looking for ways to recapture business that nutrition programs had lost over the years to multiple competitors, including vending companies and fundraising by campus groups. They also wanted to create a partnership with high school students who had come to view CNS as “the enemy.”

One of the main challenges was working with the district’s principals who were very reluctant to change how they were doing business. They were accustomed to working with the bottling companies or outside third-party vendors. Because their bottom line was financial, CNS had to convince them that a partnership with the CNS department would be better for them. That meant designing contracts that read just like their current ones, only better. CNS offered a bigger signing bonus, an annual renewing bonus, and a higher commission. CNS agreed to be responsible for installing, operating, cleaning, and securing the machines, and for handling refunds. The high school agreed to assign their security people the added duty of monitoring the machines to insure student access and report any problems or vandalism to CNS.

[See Vending Partnerships, page 275.]

The machines were purchased and installed during the less busy summer school months. The distributor trained the CNS staff on the operation and repair of the machines. The machines were filled; announcements were made over the school's public speakers and in the daily bulletin—CNS was “in business.”

From the beginning of the CNS vending operation, the department received constant positive feedback with no complaints. There was so much business when the busy school year started that CNS was filling the machines three times per day.

Because the CNS vending operation is a partnership with the schools, even the custodial staff and campus security helped to make it a win-win venture. They knew that the school received money from another department within the district, and they did their part to help the program succeed.

The partnership with the school means that the machines are allowed to be open all day. The students can grab something nutritious before school, between classes, at nutrition break, at lunch, after school, and after practice. Adults attending night classes can access the machines before their classes begin.

Future plans

- Work with software vendors to enable students who participate in the National School Lunch Program to access the vending machines for reimbursable meals.
- Develop a Fitness and Nutrition Center at two middle schools.
- Extend the Healthy Vending program to the other comprehensive high schools in the district. As a first step, CNS is already conducting focus groups and deciding on which machines to select.

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