

School cafeterias to try psychology in lunch line

By *MARILYNN MARCHIONE, AP Medical Writer Marilynn Marchione, AP Medical Writer* – Tue Oct 12, 9:21 pm ET

Hide the chocolate milk behind the plain milk. Get those apples and oranges out of stainless steel bins and into pretty baskets. Cash-only for desserts.

These subtle moves can entice kids to make healthier choices in school lunch lines, studies show. Food and restaurant marketers have long used similar tricks. Now the government wants in on the act.

Department of Agriculture announced what it called a major new initiative Tuesday, giving \$2 million to food behavior scientists to find ways to use psychology to improve kids' use of the federal school lunch program and fight childhood obesity.

A fresh approach is clearly needed, those behind the effort say.

About one-third of children and teens are obese or overweight. Bans on soda and junk food have backfired in some places. Some students have **abandoned school meal programs that tried to force-feed healthy choices.** When one school district put fruit on every lunch tray, most of it ended up in the garbage.

So instead of pursuing a carrot or a stick approach, schools want to entice kids to choose the **carrot sticks**, figuring children are more likely to eat something they select themselves.

"It's not nutrition till it's eaten," said Joanne Guthrie, a **USDA** researcher who announced the new grants. The initiative will include creation of a child nutrition center at Cornell University, which has long led this type of research.

Some tricks already judged a success by Cornell researchers: Keep ice cream in freezers without glass display tops so the treats are out of sight. Move salad bars next to the checkout registers, where students linger to pay, giving them more time to ponder a salad. And start a quick line for make-your-own subs and wraps, as Corning East High School in upstate New York did.

["I eat that every day now," instead of the chicken patty sandwiches that used to be a staple, said Shea Beecher, a 17-year-old senior.

"It's like our own little Subway," said Sterling Smith, a 15-year-old sophomore. (Hint to the school: Freshen up the fruit bowl; the choices are pretty narrow by the time Smith gets to his third-shift lunch period.)

Last year, the USDA asked the **Institute of Medicine for advice on its school lunch and breakfast programs**, which provide free or subsidized meals to more than **31 million schoolchildren each day**. The institute **recommended more fruit, vegetables and whole grains with limits on fat, salt and calories**. But it was clear this wouldn't help unless kids accepted healthier foods, Guthrie said.

"We can't just say we're going to change the menu and all of our problems will be solved," she said.

The agency requested proposals from researchers on how to get kids to actually eat the good stuff. Cornell scientists Brian Wansink and David Just will get \$1 million to establish the child nutrition center. Fourteen research sites around the country will share the other \$1 million.

"Findings from this emerging field of research — behavioral economics — could lead to significant improvements in the diets of millions of children across America," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a statement.

Cornell's focus will be developing "smart lunchrooms" that guide kids to make good choices even when more tempting ones are around.

"We're not taking things away from kids," Wansink said. "It's making the better choice the easier, more convenient choice."

Wansink is a prominent food science researcher, known for studies on the depiction of food in paintings of the Last Supper and how the placement of a candy jar can affect how much people eat from it.

Christine Wallace, food service director for Corning City School District near Cornell University, met him a few years ago and invited him to use her 14 schools as a lab.

"We tend to look at what we're offering and to make sure it's well prepared and in the correct portion size, and not the psychology of it. We're just not trained that way," Wallace said.

For example, some Corning schools had express lines for a la carte items — mostly chips, cookies and ice cream. The idea was to reduce bottlenecks caused by full tray lunches that took longer to ring up. But the result was a public health nightmare.

"We were making it very convenient for them to quickly go through the line and get a bunch of less nutritious items," Wallace said.

After studies by Wansink, they renamed some foods in the elementary schools — "X-ray vision carrots" and "lean, mean green beans" — and watched consumption rise. Cafeteria workers also got more involved, asking, "Would you rather have green beans or carrots today?" instead of waiting for a kid to request them.

And just asking, "Do you want a salad with that?" on pizza day at one high school raised salad consumption 30 percent, Wansink said.