



DAN MACMEDAN; HALANA TURNER AND HUNTER WHITNEY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Students Katelyn Hamford, left, Amanda Ajobiewe and Diamond Alvarado load up at the salad bar at Beatty Elementary School in Riverside, Calif. The school charges \$2.75 for lunch, which is so popular that it inspired a catering division for outside customers.**

# GOOD OR GROSS?

## New federal guidelines require schools to serve healthy meals

By Matt Alderton

**C**UBES OF AMBIGUOUS MEAT swimming in gelatinous, oatmeal-colored gravy. A piece of green meatloaf. A sandwich the size of a smartphone. A lump of mashed potatoes so solid it can be tossed in the air like a baseball. A paltry two-piece portion of chicken nuggets.

These are just a few of the images students have broadcast on social media this school year using the snarky hashtag #ThanksMichelleObama. Their response to new healthy-eating guidelines for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch Program is a rallying cry laced with humor.

But it's no laughing matter to parents like Tina Jackson of Indianapolis, whose 15-year-old daughter comes home from

school hungry every day.

"She uses the word 'gross' a lot," said Jackson, recounting her daughter's daily lunch report. "It concerns me because she's going the whole day at school without eating anything. Of course I want my daughter to eat healthier. That's a good thing. But she's not getting the nutrition in the middle of the day that she needs. It's only healthy if the kids are eating it."

Some aren't, but many are.

Back on Twitter, for instance, exclamations of genuine gratitude temper complaints of moldy fruit and mystery meat. Even as one student tweets a



**Students last year** tweeted out enough unappetizing photos of school lunches that #ThanksMichelleObama trended on Twitter.

sorry tray of gray hamburger meat, another tweets a bountiful bowl of authentic Asian stir-fry. As one student complains of Spanish rice that looks more like "Spanish moss," the parent of another applauds her child's fresh and colorful lunch: fresh strawberries, mixed melon, Caesar salad and chicken Parmesan atop a bed of penne pasta.

"Is there gross food out there in schools? I can't deny that there is," said

registered dietitian Dayle Hayes of Billings, Mont., a school nutrition consultant and founder of School Meals That Rock

**CONTINUED »**





**Angelica Rodriguez, left,** and Lilliana Castro, students at Beatty Elementary School in Riverside, Calif., enjoy a nutritious lunch that includes items from the school's salad bar.

DAN MACMEDAN

(schoolmealsthatrock.org), a website showcasing best-in-class school meals. "But by and large, I think there is tremendous good in school meals today."

Because nutrition guidelines and federal reimbursement are equal nationwide, the difference between "good" and "gross" isn't always calories or cash, according to Hayes. Often, it's who's in charge.

"If reimbursement and requirements are the same, what creates the difference?" she asked. "It's a very complex answer. Probably the most fundamental piece, however, is the district's vision for school meals. Some school districts have a very powerful, progressive, forward-thinking vision of what it looks like to serve healthy school meals. Others do not."

### HEALTHY FOOD, FAST

The National School Lunch Program was created in 1946, when President Truman signed the National School Lunch Act providing free or low-cost lunches to qualified students through subsidies to schools. Its original purpose was to counter malnutrition: Many American men had been rejected for military service during World War II due to diet-related health problems, so lawmakers established the National School Lunch Program as a "measure of national security" to safeguard the health of American children.

Nearly 70 years later, what began as a solution to malnourishment is now

a solution for the opposite problem: childhood obesity, which has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"When Michelle Obama chose childhood obesity as her platform, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act ... which raised nutrition standards for school meals for the first time in 15 years," Hayes explained. Changes — which took effect during the 2012-13 school year — include increasing whole grains, fruits, vegetables and low- and no-fat dairy; reducing calories, fat and sodium; and improving food quality with more farm-to-school connections. "Most of the changes I completely support," said Hayes.

To help school districts transition successfully from preparing processed foods to cooking from scratch, the USDA has awarded more than \$25 million in grants to provide school food service professionals with equipment, training and technical assistance. For some school

**"They look at (the new USDA guidelines) and they tell me, 'Rodney, it can't be done.' Don't tell me it can't be done; we're doing it."**

**— Rodney Taylor, nutrition services director**

districts, however, the change has been too much, too fast.

"The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act is the best thing that's ever happened to (the National School Lunch Program)," said Rodney Taylor, director of nutrition services for Riverside Unified School District in Riverside, Calif. "If I had one criticism for the USDA, however, it's that they might have asked for too much too quickly."

In states and school districts unprepared for the new guidelines, Taylor said, rapid change has left students paying more money for less food of inferior quality. "In those places, there has been a rebellion," Taylor continued. "Even from food service directors."

### SAVORY SOLUTIONS

Amid "rebellion" against the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, the USDA has reported a 4.2 percent decline in National School Lunch Program participation, down from 31.6 million students in 2012 to 30.3 million students in 2014.

Still, progress is evident. For example,



USDA



DAN MACMEDAN

Many schools are making their lunches more tasty and visually appealing, serving items such as Hawaiian chicken wraps. Dora Aleman, a worker at Beatty Elementary School, adds to the school's salad bar.

research published last year by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) found that 70 percent of elementary and middle school students and 63 percent of high school students generally like the healthier school lunches that rolled out in fall 2012. At approximately half of elementary schools (56 percent), middle schools (44 percent) and high schools (53 percent), students initially complained about the new meals but eventually accepted them as they became more accustomed to them, research found.

"Our studies show that kids are OK with these changes, and that there have not been widespread challenges with kids not buying or eating the meals," said Lindsey Turner, lead author of the study.

And a study released in early March by the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut found that school children are throwing out less food and choosing to eat more vegetables and fruit.

In the most successful school districts, acceptance is a product of ingenuity. Take Taylor, for example, whose school lunch program went from having a \$3.1 million debt and a 47 percent participation rate in 2002, when he was hired, to having a \$6 million surplus and a 70 percent participation rate in 2014.

"Instead of treating our school lunch program like an entitlement program — if the government wants us to do more,

or do better, they need to give us more money — we treat it like a business," said Taylor, who is well known in school food service circles for pioneering the concept of "farmers market salad bars." Now at elementary schools across Taylor's district, salad bars stocked with fresh produce purchased directly from local farms give students more and varied daily choices. Grants from organizations such as Whole Foods Market's Whole Kids Foundation support the cost-neutral program, according to Taylor. Food costs are minimized by a reduction in waste and more money from more school-lunch participation.

"Salad bars work because they appeal to the senses — sight, smell and taste," explained Taylor, whose next move was hiring a professional chef to create nutritious, restaurant-quality meals. The food is so good that it's spawned a catering division that does everything from business lunches to weddings.

Through catering and various other initiatives, Riverside's program is projected to make \$2 million this school year. "My colleagues across the country are leaving school food service in droves because they don't want to do the work," Taylor continued. "They look at (the new USDA guidelines) and they tell me, 'Rodney, it can't be done.' Don't tell me it can't be done; we're doing it."

Taylor isn't alone. In Illinois' Burr Ridge Community Consolidated School District

180, nutrition director Beverly Kowalcze has founded an interactive community garden, which helps improve kids' perception of veggies. In Minnesota, Bertrand Weber, Minneapolis Public Schools director of Culinary and Nutrition Services, procures recipes from local restaurants, modifies them according to USDA guidelines and sells the meals from a grant-funded food truck. And in Texas' Amarillo Independent School District, which outsources its school lunch to Chartwells School Dining Services, students discover healthy food by watching a chef prepare the meal in a restaurant-style kitchen.

Although food trucks, chefs and kitchens cost money, the gap between the best and worst school lunches isn't always financial. In fact, the same programs that he currently champions in Riverside, where 62.6 percent of students receive free or reduced-price school lunch, Taylor previously instituted in California's Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, where just 29.4 percent of students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school lunch.

"To be perfectly honest, it's not about money," Hayes reiterated. "If you look at districts that are doing a really good job, what they have in common is creativity — in terms of preparing food, financing food and marketing food to kids. More than anything, that's what's going to make a big, major difference in our schools." ●

BY THE NUMBERS



**4.9 BILLION**

School lunches served annually as part of the National School Lunch Program.



**30.3 MILLION**

Students who participate in the National School Lunch Program.



**\$16.2 BILLION**

Annual cost of the National School Lunch Program.



**224 BILLION**

Total school lunches served by the USDA since the inception of the National School Lunch Program.

Source: USDA



BY THE NUMBERS: THINKSTOCK; USDA

The concept of a hot lunch for school children has been around for decades; in 1941, children in Taos, N.M., eat a lunch that cost about a penny a day.