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Cafeteria workers learn to make healthy from-scratch entrees

by Adam Poulisse
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Chef Cyndie Story, right, demonstrates care in handling kale with Pennie Thomson, of Henderson County, on Tuesday during a class at Orchard Knob Elementary. Cafeteria workers from all over Tennessee are in town this week for training and an exhibition at the Chattanooga Convention Center.

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Though students are out of the classroom for the summer, cafeteria nutritionists and workers from across Tennessee were hard at work in the Orchard Knob Elementary School cafeteria, serving up a hearty blend of healthy meats, grains and vegetables that will grace students' lunch trays in the fall.

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The purpose of the program, Back to Basics, is to demonstrate healthier options to school nutritionists and cafeteria chefs, according to Cyndie Story, a chef and child nutritionist of 25 years from Scottsville, Ky. Story led about 20 nutritionists in making from-scratch entrees rather than the processed food -- such as chicken nuggets -- with which students are more familiar.

Back to Basics lasted 10 hours over Monday and Tuesday and was a precursor to the School Nutrition Association conference being held this week in Chattanooga.

It comes at the right time, too. Though obesity rates in Tennessee have decreased from 2007 when they were 36.5 percent, Tennessee was still the sixth-highest state for childhood obesity in 2010 with roughly one of every five kids -- 20.6 percent -- considered obese, according to Nashville Public Television's Children's Health Crisis website.

Changes already have affected U.S. public school lunchrooms. In January, new requirements for the National School Lunch Program upped the required weekly intake of vegetables, meats or meat alternatives and whole grains.

"I think schools are one of the solutions," Story said. "But schools didn't start the problem. I want to make that clear."

"This allows students to choose healthy food options that they may not have at home," she added.

Back to Basics was also held at East Lake Academy, East Lake Middle School and Brown Academy -- and a Hamilton County cafeteria manager was stationed at each one, according to Carolyn K. Childs, director of school nutrition at Hamilton County Schools.

April Burkhart, cafeteria manager for Orchard Knob Elementary, represented her school.

"When you put a variety of food out, and as colorful as it is, it makes the kids want to try it," Burkhart said.

The kitchen bustled with the chefs and nutritionists at different stations, preparing foods such as a spicy chicken lime soup or Moroccan carrot salad. Debie Walker, a nutritionist at Walker Valley High School in Bradley County, was slicing her whole grain cornbread into squares. But before that, she struggled with cutting a tough butternut squash.

"That's something we've never had to deal with before," Walker said.

To season the foods, participants were asked to steer clear of table salt and use less-fattening oils and spices such as garlic to infuse the foods with that extra kick of flavor.

"The USDA is starting to limit the amount of salt to use in the food," Walker said.

After the entrees were done, they were placed in heaters in the cafeteria portion, displaying attractive, bright-colored dishes of healthy foods that the participants had made -- and would test out.

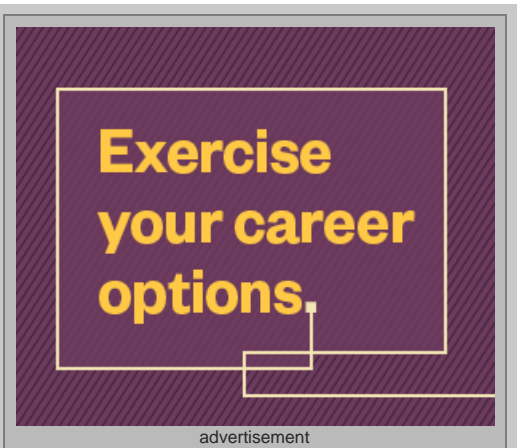
"It turned out great," said Kathy Tomlinson, a nutritionist at Black Fox Elementary in Murfreesboro, Tenn., while she munched on her dish of seasoned squash, peppers and black olives. "We're going to have to teach the kids how to eat [healthy] again."

Childs said the plan is to implement some of the recipes learned this week into school lunches starting in the fall. Presentation and trial-and-error will be key to getting the students to eat things that may not look, or taste, familiar, she said.

"It's not just in how you present it, we're also going to do some experimenting and taste-testing with the students," Childs said. "But it's not just about food, it's a combination of the foods you eat and activities."



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