

# School lunch: healthier options on the horizon

East Lansing looks to provide nutritious meal alternatives

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**East Lansing, Michigan**

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At the beginning of this school year, students were asked to fill out a survey regarding the school lunch options. This survey included questions concerning current school lunch offerings as well as changes students would like to see. A bulk of the questions dealt with healthy a la carte choices, and whether or not students would purchase them.

Why this sudden interest in the way East Lansing students are eating? East Lansing Public Schools has received a grant to improve physical activity opportunities and equipment for students. A small part of that project is to improve school meal options. Secondly, a new federal law requires every school district in the country to meet certain nutrition standards in their food service program. ELPS has formed a committee to develop policies that will improve physical activity, opportunities for healthy eating and nutrition education within the district.

Another motivation for developing lunch food reform is the high level of childhood obesity in the United States. Michigan, as a state, has the second highest obesity rate in the nation. Among other things, obesity is directly related to the development of type 2 diabetes, an ever growing epidemic among youth.

Anne Murphy, PhD, a local nutritionist with the Michigan Team Nutrition, conducted the survey and is working closely with the school district to implement changes. Murphy has worked with several other area school districts, gathering input from students, deciding what changes can be made within the financial limitations, making the changes and tracking student acceptance.

How has this program worked in other schools?

“Fowlerville High School no longer fries any foods,” explained Murphy. “They have also introduced a refrigerated healthy snack machine which sells sandwiches, baby carrots and pre-packaged sliced apples.”

Fowlerville is not the only district that has seen such changes. Williamston High School, for example, now sells homemade fruit smoothies as part of their a la carte options. In the Leslie school district, they have increased the price of cookies and sugary drinks while lowering the prices of more nutritious snacks, such as flavored milk.

Dr. Murphy has compiled the results of our survey, and has upwards of 17 pages of comments and suggestions from East Lansing High School and MacDonalld Middle School students. She has also visited health classes, asking for direct student input.

“I have asked students questions that help me interpret the data and proceed with changes in a thoughtful and respectful way,” said Murphy. “I will meet with the foodservice director this month and we will select some changes to implement this year and some for next year.”

Students seem to recognize the need for change. Senior Kip Kaitany admitted that when he eats school lunch, it is anything but nutritious.

“I usually get the chicken patty and fries,” said Kaitany. “It is pretty unhealthy, but right now there aren’t much better alternatives.”

Once new food options are in place, Dr. Murphy will continue to seek student suggestions and feedback, modifying meal and a la carte choices that fit our school.