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In Berkeley, fine dining starts early

Pilot program serves gourmet breakfasts in elementary school

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Fourth-grader Giovanni Cardenas maneuvered a red Radio Flyer wagon, laden with caramelized onion and fingerling potato focaccia, down the hall of LeConte Elementary in Berkeley.

He has the vaunted title of "snack passer," helping deliver free, healthful breakfasts to the desks of each of the school's 354 students. It is the latest such effort in a school district that is a national leader in the fight against childhood obesity and hunger.

Because the district is in Berkeley, the food that began rolling out at LeConte this week has to measure up to some of the toughest school food guidelines in the nation: no hydrogenated oils, no dyes or preservatives, no refined sugars, no bovine growth hormones and absolutely no genetically altered "Frankenfood."

"I've never seen this stuff before, and when I look at it, it looks kinda nasty," Tommy Rodriguez, 10, said Wednesday morning as he stared at a Bosc pear and the square of focaccia. "But then I try it, and it's pretty good."

Berkeley Unified School District modeled its program after red-wagon breakfasts in Antioch and Folsom (Sacramento County). But those districts serve traditional cafeteria fare, such as pizza pockets or French toast fingers, that helps make 27 percent of the state's kids overweight, said Karen Candito, Berkeley's director of nutrition.

It took Candito three years to find a handful of vendors willing to provide the nine-grain muffins, organic cereal and other fare that lives up to the groundbreaking food policy the district adopted last fall. The plan encourages employees to model healthy snack behavior and sends parents guidelines on how to pack nutritious lunches. It encourages eating locally grown food, with extra credit for eating produce grown in school gardens.

"Lots of district food directors want to take this path, but they don't have the support," Candito said. "At Berkeley, we have an integrated focus on physical education, school gardens, nutrition education and a commitment to healthy food in the cafeteria," Candito said.

LeConte is the first of Berkeley's 16 schools to try universal breakfast delivery. If the program is successful this year, the goal is to have red-wagon service in all schools except Berkeley High by 2007. Candito has applied for a federal grant, which would provide \$15,000 per school, to expand the program. The district is using reimbursements from the federal free and reduced-price lunch program to pay for the universal breakfast at LeConte, where half the students already qualify for free meals.

"I love it because I don't have to skip breakfast anymore," said Sarah Abiharb, 9. "Now, I eat with my class together like a nice little feast."

Although breakfast is available at all Berkeley school cafeterias, many kids, just like their parents, are too rushed to get to school early enough to eat it. At LeConte, less than one-fourth of the students make it to the cafeteria before 8:15 a.m., district nutrition supervisor Marni Posey said.

"They are held up on the bus, their parents are late, they sleep in," Posey said.

Teachers gave the new breakfast mixed reviews. Some of them have embraced it, singing food songs with their children or making up nutrition quizzes while breakfast is served, while others

say it cuts into teaching time that is already being whittled away by mandatory state test preparation.

The system has a few kinks. Some kids eat at home and decline the meal, the kindergartners make a mess that takes a long time to clean up, and some of the offerings, like onions in the morning, are a little too "Chez Panissey" for kids, district spokesman Mark Coplan said.

But logistics are fixable, Candito said. The real problems, she said, are hungry or overweight children who are distracted from learning by health problems.

A study this week showed that California's obesity bill is \$21.7 billion a year thanks to the resulting medical care, workers' compensation and lost workplace productivity, Candito said.

"It's taken so many years to get into this childhood obesity mess, it's going to take years to unravel it," she said.

Researchers at Children's Hospital Oakland and UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health are going to study the Berkeley red-wagon program's effect on student health. If the results are positive, Candito said she hopes to use the information to lobby lawmakers to put more money into overhauling school food.

Berkeley's efforts are drawing attention: A group of school administrators from Olympia, Wash., flew in recently for a kitchen tour, and San Francisco supervisors have asked their public school leaders to look to districts like Berkeley's for . It teamed up this year with Alice Waters and her Chez Panisse Foundation, which is giving the district \$3.8 million over three years to fold healthy eating into the curriculum.

LeConte student Lindsey Flores, 10, didn't quite look inspired Wednesday as she sniffed at her breakfast focaccia, took a bite, and spit it out.

"It's gross," she said. "I like the pizza pie from the cafeteria better."

Brandon Small, 10, solved the problem by scraping the potatoes and onions off with his pencil.

"I used to skip breakfast because I would wake up late," he said. "Now, I learn better because when I'm hungry all I think about is food."

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