



Kids First Wellness
Advocates Series
Lincoln Table Hosting Team
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Lincoln - When the Rhode Island Nutritional Requirements (RINR) went into effect for school meals statewide on September of 2009, one of the challenges was fully implementing the increased amounts of fruits and vegetables (especially locally grown ones!) on the plate. Mandating more fruits and veggies to a school meal is one thing, getting kids to actually taste, eat and enjoy more fruits and vegetables at school lunch is another.

In the Lincoln school district, the Central Elementary Table Hosting Team is making a sincere effort to help. Encouraging students to taste and eat more fruits and vegetables is just one of their goals. Encouraging parents to get more personally involved in the healthier meals being served in the school cafeteria is another. And encouraging open and honest communication and feedback to ARAMARK cafeteria staff and management about the menu changes is another.

“It’s a great win-win situation for all involved, “ says Karen Zangari, mother of a Central Elementary student and a member of the Lincoln Health & Wellness Committee. “The parents get to see how the RI nutrition guidelines have changed the foods offered at school and to help problem solve. The food service staff get feedback from the students and parents and the teachers get to have more adults on hand for recess and lunch. And the kids get more adult attention at the table!”

Adult attention is certainly one of the key factors of a successful table hosting program. At Central Elementary, the Table Hosting Team works together to make lunchtime memorable and enjoyable for the kids.

The volunteer Table Hosts participate at recess with a selected grade level and then join them afterwards for lunch in the cafeteria. On a recent winter morning, 10 parents met near the Main

Office of the school to go over the plan for lunchtime. As Table Hosts, they would be expected to get in the lunch line with students, help select the 3 servings of fruit or vegetable sides that accompany each student meal and then help steer the conversation at the table towards eating lots of fruits and vegetables and the benefits of eating healthy.

To help facilitate the process as well as encourage those who brought lunch from home to participate in the food discussions, the cafeteria staff provides a “tasting tray” filled with fruit and veggie sides (and multiple forks) for each host’s table. The tray gives the host an easy starting point for getting the conversation (and the tasting) going.

“Who knows what beans give your body?” says one host, holding up the sample cup of BBQ baked beans. Although she was looking for an answer about vitamins and fiber, the opportunity to inject elementary school humor into the discussion was almost too easy to pass up.



“Gas!!!” giggled three 3rd graders in unison. The rest of the table was delighted. But Table Host Mom didn’t miss a beat.

“Yes, that’s right, beans do that, but they are also really good for your heart. They can be a great source of protein too - which is what makes your muscles big and strong.” She held up the sample cup from the tray. “Now who wants to try some?” Four hands shot up into the air and samples and forks were distributed.

After tallying the results of the bean tastings on the survey sheet provided by cafeteria staff, the Table Host went on to the next sample, encouraging the kids to taste each food before offering an opinion of whether they liked that food or not. On this particular day, the tasting included Rhode Island grown carrot slices, cucumber coins, fresh sliced apples, sliced peaches, celery sticks, cherry tomatoes and BBQ beans. Even an informal observation could tell that the apples and peaches were going to be favorites. The survey results, compiled later by cafeteria staff, indicated that a large percentage of the 65 students with table hosts that day really enjoyed the increased fruits and vegetables, with particular preference given to the apples. The kids also had a long list of suggestions for other foods they wanted to see on the menu - tangerines, kiwi, cranberry sauce, watermelon and zucchini to name a few. Exactly



the kind of feedback Andrew Viveiros, Director of Child Nutrition for ARAMARK, likes to see.

“It’s so important to get both parents and students talking about healthier menu changes,” Viveiros says. Like several other school districts around the the state, Lincoln started to make healthy improvements to their school meals a full year before RINR became mandated, so Viveiros knows firsthand how involved the process of changing menus can be both with students as well as with staff and parents. “We have been very pleased with the parent response and involvement, because parent feedback is key to getting kids to make healthy choices. It has been a pleasure working with this group of dedicated parents on the Table Hosting program and we only hope to improve school lunch even further with their help.”

After lunch, once the students had filed back to their classrooms, the Table Hosts and Viveiros sat down for the team recap. In addition to addressing concerns about hand washing following recess, the logistics of opening the milk cooler with a tray in hand and the always mentioned lament that the students did not have enough time to eat, nearly all of the Table Hosts were feeling impressed and positive about the day’s meal. They liked the variety of fruits and vegetables that were available to the students and they liked that the kids were getting access to so many different types of sides.

One mom asked if it were possible to have her child just purchase the sides at lunchtime, a suggestion Viveiros took with serious consideration.

“Well, we’ve never offered that before, but I think it might be possible. Some of the students just purchase milk, so why not be able to offer just purchasing sides?” he said.

Thinking out loud, he continued.

“I think that could be figured out with the system we have. What would all of you think was a fair price for 1 or 2 sides? How much would each of you pay just to have your student just buy the apples or the carrots?”

The Table Host Team responded eagerly to the possibility that one of their suggestions (a good one) might actually become a reality. An animated and lively discussion followed with everyone honestly trying to figure out how to best put the idea into practice. A dozen adults, working together to encourage kids to increase their fruits and vegetables. Excellent and inspiring teamwork, indeed.