

Putting ZIP Back Into School Lunch

Industry must crusade to keep beef part of school meals.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

“I firmly believe beef should be what’s for school lunch, as well as what’s for dinner,” says Dayle Hayes, who is a parent, educator, author — and registered dietitian (RD).

Based in Billings, Mont., Hayes has been a longtime advocate of the nutritional benefits of beef. She has been a member of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s (NCBA) speakers’ bureau for decades and is also a longtime member of the School Nutrition Association. Most recently, Hayes has turned to the Internet — including Facebook, Twitter, a blog and traditional website — with messages about “School Meals That Rock.”

Noting that it was an Internet frenzy that fueled last year’s pink slime campaign against beef in schools, Hayes says, “I figure I can sell the good news about school lunch.” She describes her Facebook page as a “place to share and celebrate what is right with school nutrition in America,” and calls it a “counter-revolution to the media bashing of school meals and a tribute to every lunch lady (and gentleman) working to do amazing things for kids’ nutrition.”

Hayes says, “School nutrition people are my heroes.” She explains that they’ve got to juggle the “Rubik’s Cube” of balancing meals to meet USDA nutrition guidelines, while trying to serve hundreds of kids with only \$1 to \$1.50 to spend on food per lunch. Additionally, often this is amidst complaints about food from kids, teachers and parents.

Hayes adds, “My main concern is we need to get more food into kids and less food into trash cans.” She emphasizes that by getting

kids the food — and nutrition — they need, learning in the classroom will improve, as well.

Her efforts have been duly noted; in 2012, *FoodService Director* magazine named Hayes to its list of 20 most influential people in noncommercial foodservice.



► Dayle Hayes, Billings, Mont., is a parent, educator, author and registered dietitian (RD).

Beef’s battle

Hayes explains that, unfortunately, beef is being squeezed out of many school lunch menus with the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and the change from the Food Guide Pyramid to MyPlate — which has altered the nutrition standards that school meal programs must follow.

With the MyPlate format, half the plate must be fruits

and vegetables, one-fourth whole grains and one-fourth protein, with a serving of dairy. Of particular note with the change is that the Meat & Beans food category is now being called “Protein” with the My Plate model — meaning legume-based beans and peas, tofu and soy yogurt, cheese, nuts, seeds and eggs can be credited as the protein portion of the meal.

Hayes notes that the number of calories kids are getting with today’s school lunches is not drastically different from the school lunches of the past — there’s only a difference of about 10 calories. However, half of today’s lunches are made up of fruits and vegetables.

“The challenge,” Hayes says, “is that very few children in America

are used to eating like MyPlate.”

Hayes says the reality is we send kids to school and say, “You’re the first people in America who are going to eat the MyPlate way,” and then kids end up throwing a lot of it away and complaining that they are hungry.

Additionally, school meals must follow minimum and maximum servings based on calories, grain and protein.

“This makes it difficult for a cheeseburger to fit the current guidelines, because the bun, burger patty and cheese may be over the maximum grains and protein allowed,” explains Hayes.

She was part of an NCBA collaboration in 2008 that developed several beef recipes for school lunch plans. Among them were a beef and garden vegetable pizza, a barbecue-beef sandwich and beef wraps — each offered a high source of protein, fiber, vitamins A and C, and iron. Today, none of these recipes fit the current school nutrition guidelines

Working to change school lunches

In December 2012, under pressure from lawmakers and school nutrition programs, the USDA changed its school lunch requirements to allow more flexibility with meat and grain maximums for the school year 2012-2013. In February 2013, USDA extended this flexibility through the 2013-2014 school year, and there is now House and Senate legislation proposed to make the flexibility permanent.

On March 21, 2013, the School Nutrition Association (SNA) released a statement saying they endorse the bipartisan School Nutrition Flexibility Act (H.R. 1303). The act would permanently eliminate weekly maximums on grains and proteins served with school meals.

“The School Nutrition Flexibility Act will ensure students continue to receive well-balanced and right-sized school meals, but the legislation gives school cafeterias the flexibility they need to plan healthy menus that appeal to students,” said School Nutrition Association President Sandra Ford in the news release.

The release went on to explain that under the nutrition standards for school meals that were

due to the minimum and maximum constraints, Hayes reports.

Bringing back beef

Through collaborative efforts with the beef industry, Hayes hopes that beef and the ZIP (zinc, iron, protein) it provides can return to many school lunch programs.

She says, “Certain districts are doing a great job of getting food into kids.” She shares stories of a California school that offers a grab-and-go taco salad, a New Hampshire school that created a beef stew served in a mini-bread bowl, and other schools that serve popular chili-mac and spaghetti with beef meat sauce lunches. In Kalispell, Mont., the school nutrition program worked with local processors to get Montana-raised beef made into burgers that fit the portion sizes for the new nutrition guidelines.

Hayes emphasizes that the beef industry must work to develop new recipes that meet the current nutrition requirements for school lunches. She cites a 2012 Healthy Kids recipe contest that was hosted by USDA and the First Lady.

“Sadly, not a single beef recipe was selected,” Hayes notes.

Without a proactive effort by the beef industry to create kid-approved recipes, Hayes says, “I think that’s where school lunch is going.”

She adds, “School lunch recipes that fit into school guidelines are critical.

implemented in July 2012, weekly grain and protein limits have restricted school cafeterias from offering a variety of healthy menu items.

For example, schools could not offer daily sandwich choices because serving two slices of whole-grain bread each day exceeds weekly grain limits. Meanwhile, salads topped with grilled chicken and low-fat cheese could exceed weekly protein limits. Some schools have even had to take scratch-prepared soups off the menu because a small amount of chicken or noodles in the recipes exceeded weekly limits.

H.R. 1303 would eliminate weekly grain and protein maximums, but protect all other nutrition standards, including calorie limits and requirements that school cafeterias switch to whole grains and serve a wider variety of fruits and vegetables.

Registered dietitian and school lunch advocate Dayle Hayes notes that for long-term change to the school lunch program, “We (the beef industry) need to advocate for the repeal of weekly maximums to be permanent.”

Contact your state legislators to share your comments, as well.

Website features new beef recipes

In late March 2013, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) posted several new recipes and resources online for K-12 Foodservice. The information can be found at www.beefoodservice.com/k-12foodservice.aspx.

Featured beef recipes fit current school nutrition guidelines — and have been evaluated in schools across the United States to evaluate student response. The lineup includes:

Rock and Roll Beef Wrap: A mixture of ranch-seasoned ground beef, coleslaw or broccoli slaw and quinoa served in either whole-wheat or spinach tortillas or lettuce cups.

Sweet Potato Beef Mash-Up: Southwest-seasoned ground beef and sweet potatoes served hash-style and topped with a mixture of plain yogurt and hot pepper sauce, served in a small whole-wheat tortilla.

Spy Thai Beef: A savory mixture of ground beef, sunflower (or peanut) butter, reduced-sodium soy sauce and other seasonings. It can be served over whole wheat noodles, in lettuce cups or over baked wonton crisps, and topped with red bell pepper strips, shredded carrots, pea pods and chopped fresh basil or cilantro leaves, as desired.

Sweet and Sloppy Joe: A mixture of ground beef, bell peppers, onions, raisins and tomato sauce seasoned with dried oregano and ancho chili powder. They can be served on a whole-wheat roll/bun and topped with chopped mango, jalapeño, tomato, cilantro or green onion.

Wrangler’s Beef Chili: A mixture of ground beef, chopped onion, canned pinto beans, tomato purée and frozen corn seasoned with garlic powder, chili powder, ground cumin and dried oregano. Chili can be made Cincinnati-style by adding cinnamon and served over whole-wheat noodles, or Moroccan-style by substituting white beans for pinto beans and adding green beans served over whole-wheat couscous. Calcium can be added with Greek yogurt as a topping.

The resources that have been developed by NCBA also include two fact sheets emphasizing the nutritional benefits beef offers in kids’ diets — one was written to be shared with parents and the other was written to be shared with school foodservice/nutrition professionals. These are available at www.beefnutrition.org.



Rock and Roll Beef Wrap

What we created in 2008 no longer fit the current meal pattern.” Hayes did work with NCBA this winter in the development of several new beef recipes for school lunches (see sidebar with more information.)

Hayes says “local food” is another big trend with many school districts. She suggests the beef industry must step up and help create awareness that “local” is not just fruits and vegetables. Hayes points out that beef can be local for every state in the nation. As an example, she shares that the Portland, Ore., school district serves Oregon beef as part of their “Oregon-grown” lunch.

Hayes also notes that schools are concerned with shortfall nutrients for children, mainly calcium, potassium, vitamin D and dietary fiber, as well as vitamins A, C and E and minerals magnesium and phosphorus. Recognizing this, Hayes suggests that the beef industry must adjust its messaging to help school districts, parents and

students recognize the nutrients that beef provides.

She emphasizes that one of the biggest concerns is that many kids are not getting enough food at home — meaning that healthy and appealing school lunches are that much more important.

“School lunch is only nutritious when kids actually eat or drink it,” Hayes points out. For example, an apple only benefits a child if it gets eaten, and the same can be said for lentil soup or kale pizza.

Hayes believes beef is something kids will eat, and it has the nutrition they need, as well. Through the development of beef recipes, along with outreach and positive buzz by the beef industry, Hayes believes beef can become more prevalent and popular on school menus.

Hayes concludes, “We need to share the stories about good beef school lunches, so when people think about cool lunch in school, it’s not just the kale pizza they are talking about.”



Editor’s Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.