BONNEVILLE JOINT SCHOOL DISTRICT | Idaho Falls, Idaho

Idaho School Steps Up to Drive Sodium Down

Problem

School-aged children consume an average of about 1,000 milligrams more sodium a day than is recommended by the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Venues that regularly feed children, such as the Bonneville Joint School District, must reconsider the way they purchase and prepare school meals to meet national nutrition standards.

Project

The food service director at Bonneville Joint School District worked with the schools' chef to calculate the average sodium content of meals and identify opportunities for sodium reduction. The staff used menu and production records to target high sodium items and develop a menu plan that was lower in sodium but tasty and cost-effective.

Outcomes

The staff found that many strategies for removing or replacing high sodium items and meals, including removing pickle spears, serving burgers without cheese, and serving salad dressing as a choice rather than by default.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Salt
  www.cdc.gov/salt
- Bonneville Joint School District No. 93
  www.d93schools.org
- Final Rule, Nutrition Standards for National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, 2012
  www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/sodium.pdf

Statement of Problem: On average, school-aged children (6 to 18 years old) consume nearly 3,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day, about 1,000 mg above the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommendation of 2,300 mg or less. Studies show that as sodium intake increases, blood pressure also rises. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Most sodium comes from packaged and restaurant foods that are often convenient, inexpensive, and appealing. Venues that regularly feed children, such as school cafeterias, must overcome these obstacles to reduce sodium.

Project Description: To receive federal reimbursement and donated foods as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, schools must meet national nutrition standards, so both keeping a record of menus and recipes and training staff to follow standardized recipes and practices are important business strategies for school food service operations. Before the nutrition standards for sodium began in the 2014-2015 school year, Heather Plain, Child Nutrition Director of Bonneville Joint School District No. 93 in Idaho Falls, Idaho, started a compliance analysis.

School chef Brenda Thompson worked with Plain to calculate the average sodium content of meals and identify opportunities for sodium reduction. As a proxy measure for sales, Plain and Thompson evaluated ingredients, and they reviewed meals and production records to estimate counts of foods purchased and served. Plain also used menu records to target high sodium items and days in the menu plan that featured high sodium meals. The staff used these tools and their creativity to develop a menu plan that was lower in sodium, yet tasty and cost-effective.

Outcomes: The Bonneville Joint School District was able to bring average sodium into line with the Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program. Some notable changes to the menu were made:

- **Removed the dill pickle spear from salads;** saved 320 mg of sodium (1-ounce serving size).
- **Stopped adding margarine and salt to vegetables;** saved 220 mg of sodium per serving.

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- **Served hamburgers instead of cheeseburgers;** saved 145 mg of sodium per cheese slice.
- **Served fresh or frozen vegetables instead of processed vegetables** (fresh broccoli with ranch instead of tater tots and ketchup); saved 225 mg of sodium.
- **Made baked beans using USDA vegetarian beans;** saved 400 mg of sodium.
- **Switched to a lite ranch packet instead of making dressing in-house;** saved 88 mg of sodium.
- **Offered salad dressing as choice instead of serving it with every salad;** reduced consumption by 25%.

Conclusions: The staff found that many strategies to remove or replace high sodium items and meals did not require ordering or producing new products. Popular strategies included removing dill pickle spears from salads and sandwiches, removing added margarine and salt from vegetable dishes, serving burgers without cheese, and offering salad dressing as a choice rather than serving it automatically with each salad. In addition, Plain used foods donated by the USDA—such as USDA vegetarian beans in the reformulation of the baked beans recipe—to keep costs down. The district was creative and willing to change menus by incorporating a wider variety of fresh and frozen vegetables in place of processed counterparts, cutting back on salty condiments, and exploring the sodium and cost differences of packaged condiments compared with producing them in-house. By implementing these changes, Plain and her staff were able to reduce the average sodium per meal to 1,099 mg (removing 22% of sodium from the original 1,420 mg per meal) in lunches served to K-6 students. The current national target is set at no more than 1,230 mg per lunch for K-5 students.

After successfully reducing sodium in meals, Bonneville Joint School District No. 93 and other U.S. schools have room for further reductions over time. National nutrition standards provide stepwise targets for reducing the sodium content of school meals over 10 years, to allow time for schools to modify menus and food companies to reformulate products. Supporting school food service operators and staff who are incorporating sodium reduction strategies into healthy school meals is an important part of continuing these efforts to reduce the burden of high blood pressure on the nation's children.

For more information please contact

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October 2015