

A GLUTEN-FREE SOLUTION

In Rochester, Minn., it took a concerned parent to get the foodservice program to blaze a new dietary trail. **by Amy Leger**

Each time I go to my daughter's school for lunch, the aroma takes me right back to being 10 years old. It is the smell of comfort food made in mass quantities. My memories are of white macaroni and cheese and peanut butter/honey sandwiches. It isn't a bad memory; it just takes me back in time.

School lunches have certainly transformed since then, to include chicken nuggets, hamburgers and pizza. Going through the lunch line is a rite of passage of sorts for millions of school children. As I became a parent, I quickly learned it also is something many of us take for granted.



For some kids that hot lunch can be a time of envy; a reminder of how different they are from other students. Thousands of students across the United States have celiac disease and many times they cannot eat hot lunch with their friends. Celiac disease is an auto-immune disorder in which gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye, becomes toxic to the person's gut. Gluten flattens the villi in the small intestine, robbing sufferers of nutrients from their food. So when breakfast or lunch choices include breading, noodles or a bun, celiac children often are left out. As a result, most of these kids bring some or all of their meals from home, leaving parents asking: Is this how it will always be—a lifetime of "brown bagging" it?

In the Rochester, Minn., School District, the answer is no, thanks to some school nutritionists who are being progressive and thinking outside the box.

"It all started with one mom in 2004," recalls Sherri Knutson, student nutrition services coordinator for the district. That was the day Mary Kay Warner called her, asking about gluten-free options at school for her celiac daughter Kimberly, who was about to enter first grade.

Knutson had been in foodservice for nearly two decades and never before had anyone ever requested accommodations for a gluten-free diet. Knutson and Warner quickly met to discuss Kimberly's favorite foods and the options the district could come up with. Knutson's goal, she explains, was "to allow Kimberly to eat with her friends and grow up eating school lunch." Thus, "Kimberly's Menu" was born, taking Rochester's foodservice program into uncharted territory.

Gluten-free boot camp: The Rochester Public School system is located in the same upscale, highly regarded community in Minnesota as the world-renowned Mayo Clinic. When Warner asked about gluten-free accommodations, Knutson knew she and her staff needed a quick education on celiac disease and the gluten-free diet. They turned to the experts at Mayo.

Using advice and research from doctors and dietitians, the nutrition department came up with an immediate, but limited, solution for Kimberly. The department began by offering gluten-free

meals two days a week: grilled cheese and pizza. Cooks and kitchen staff were trained on the diet, taught how to read labels and educated on concerns about cross-contamination.

As the years progressed, so did the menu. “Kimberly’s Menu” evolved into the “Gluten-Free Elementary Lunch Menu” with more students eating from it. By the 2007-2008 school year, at least 20 students from 15 elementary schools ate from the menu, which now is offered every day. “I think if the kids don’t have to worry about that part of the day... School’s hard enough,” Warner said. Hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken strips, chicken nuggets and pizza—all gluten free—are now regular entrées. Warner says Kimberly often comes to her and says, “Mom, I had this today... it was so good!”

Busting the budget: Today, Knutson talks up the gluten-free diet, fielding questions from directors at various Minnesota districts who have heard about her groundbreaking menu. She admits the initial task of creating a daily gluten-free menu is daunting for a district; another big question is the cost. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that people who need special diet accommodations will not be charged extra for the food. In Rochester, the gluten-free lunch is about twice the cost of the \$2.05 lunch served on the main menu.

Knutson says the Rochester district “eats” much of the cost, but also says, “We need to do this. Cost is not one of the factors that should impact implementing this diet in schools.” However, she acknowledges that it may be easier said than done. School districts across the country are being told to do more with less and balancing their nutrition budgets with accommodations for special diets often can be a difficult added challenge.

Knutson recommends other districts do what Rochester did: start slow, get educated and build from there. In some cases, some of the food that is currently being purchased for the district may already be gluten-free and should be investigated. “The gluten-free diet isn’t so frightening. You can work with it,” Knutson says.

What’s next: In July of 2008, Knutson and Sweeten were asked to speak at the Midwest Regional United States Dietary Association meeting about the topic. “It surprises us that maybe we’re ahead of the game,” Knutson says of the menu. It is no surprise, however, that the U. S., Department of Agriculture, which oversees school lunch programs nationwide, wants to hear from them. Dr. Alessio Fasano, medical director for The University of Maryland-Baltimore’s Center for Celiac Research, says, “Approximately 10,000 U.S. children are diagnosed with celiac disease each year,” meaning that students who need a gluten-free diet are becoming much more common in our schools.

Knutson knows word is getting out about her effort. She is happy to educate her peers who contact her about the gluten-free menu. She would like to see more districts making school lunches even more accessible to students.

“Maybe we’ve planted a seed. We hope we have,” says Tammy Sweeten, assistant coordinator of student nutrition services in Rochester. Sweeten adds that a new smell will be wafting through the halls of Rochester schools this school year—gluten-free chocolate chip cookies. The nutrition staff created its own cookies and chocolate muffins, which will cut the gluten-free costs for the district even more. It is a nutrition challenge that “is very rewarding,” says Sweeten.

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