



Spicy Chicken Salad.

FAST FACTS

NAME OF DISTRICT:	Montgomery County Public Schools
LOCATION:	Montgomery County, Maryland
GRADES SERVED:	Pre-K-12th
NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN DISTRICT:	Over 165,000
PERCENTAGE OF FREE/REDUCED-PRICED ELIGIBLE STUDENTS PRE-PANDEMIC:	33.3%

At Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), a team of registered dietitians, chefs, manufacturers, and stakeholders (including students) are all key decisionmakers in developing innovative, healthy menus. The largest school district in Maryland, MCPS is home to the Division of Food and Nutrition Services' (DFNS) 77,000 square foot facility that includes a warehouse, test kitchen, training room, and central production space. For many schools in the districts, meals are made in the facility, shipped daily, and finished on-site.

A COMMITMENT TO STRONG NUTRITION STANDARDS

MCPS has a long history of meeting strong nutrition standards. Meals exceed national nutrition standards; on average, lunches average 983 mg sodium (currently, federal standards require school lunches to contain $\leq 1,420$ mg), and all grains offered are whole grain-rich. MCPS meals have been free of synthetic food dyes since 2018, and while no standard has been established federally, MCPS strives to reduce added sugars in their menus. Transparency is also important to MCPS, and they are updating line signage cards to include total calories, carbs, and labels for students with dietary preferences (such as vegan, halal, and kosher).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS

To innovate their menus, MCPS collaborates around concepts and recipes with manufacturers, like Rich's and Land O' Lakes, and community partners, such as the local Silver Diner. Creativity and the ability to modify recipes is important to improving nutrition while maintaining taste. For example, MCPS makes a sweet mustard sauce in-house. However, the team discovered the mustard was too high in sodium and replaced some of the mustard with mustard powder, maintaining flavor while lowering sodium.

To limit added sugars, MCPS worked with Dairy Made Dairy to reformulate their flavored yogurt and milk. Through this partnership, they were able to reduce the added sugars in their fat-free chocolate milk to 7 grams of added sugars. According to Shaun Sawko, MCPS Wellness Coordinator, students couldn't even tell a difference.

Sawko credited much of MCPS's success in offering 100 percent whole grain-rich grains to industry innovation. Now, he says, whole grain-rich products are visually indistinguishable from white (refined grain) products.



Students are engaged in the process of menu development from start to finish, including both facilitate focus groups, and taste testings.

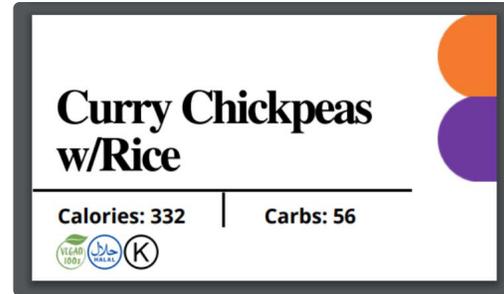
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WE USE A METHODIC APPROACH OF FACILITATED FOCUS GROUPS WITH STUDENTS, RIGOROUS TESTING OF ALL NEW RECIPES IN THE TEST KITCHEN, AND EVENTUAL SAMPLING.

–SHAUN SAWKO, MS, RDN
WELLNESS COORDINATOR

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Sawko noted that if the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) were to set an added sugars limit aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, commodity fruits would need to be packed in 100 percent juice as opposed to the syrup that they are currently packed in.



Menu signage shows students calories, carbohydrates, and designations like Vegan, Halal, and Kosher



Food service staff preparing a "hot pack" meal for elementary students.



Foodservice workers at the central facility.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Modeling healthy eating behavior by teachers and administrators
- Using standardized recipes
- Training staff to ensure universal recipe implementation and holding procedures
- Having food processors at each site

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Currently, MCPS, in partnership with Real Food For Kids, is teaming up with the Executive Chef of Silver Diner to develop plant-based menu items.



Thai Red Curry Chickpeas (a plant-based menu item currently in taste testing).

This story was developed and based on an interview and email correspondence with the district from June-September 2022. Compliance with nutrition standards is self-reported and has not been verified by CSPI.

School Website: montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/food-and-nutrition/

For more information, please contact policy@cspinet.org

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