

TOPIC: HOW DO I ESTABLISH SALAD BARS TO SHOWCASE MORE FRESH FOODS?



Photograph from Morguefile.com

Nationally known “renegade lunch lady” Ann Cooper is director of nutrition services for Boulder Valley School District, where she spearheads efforts to bring more fresh foods and healthy choices into school cafeterias. nutrition at the best price.

BVSD, the 8th largest of Colorado’s 178 public school districts, serves more than 28,000 students in 54 district and charter schools in parts of Boulder, Broomfield and Gilpin counties. Beginning in 2008, the district started a multi-year program to implement a sustainable model of scratch-cooked, closer to the source, and fresh foods. Ann, who has been advising the district throughout this process, is now responsible for implementing the district’s vision: “All children of the Boulder Valley School District will have daily access to fresh, flavorful and nutritious food made with wholesome and, when possible, local ingredients so that every child may thrive.”

Ann also runs the non-profit Food Family Farming Foundation, whose LunchBox website and other projects are dedicated helping school districts across the country implement healthy food programs.

How does she manage it all? “I don’t sleep,” jokes Ann.



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Salad Bars Are Central to Your Goals. Why Are They Effective?

“I believe in salad bars in school, and I believe in including the salad bar as an option for all reimbursable and free and reduced lunches,” said Ann. “We now have salad bars in every school in BVSD, K-12. Kids eat off of them. It works! Salad bars are a great way to give kids choice, and kids love choice. When you present them with something where they can choose and all the possible choices are healthy, you give kids the chance to make the right choices; you put the power in their hands while helping to create healthier lifestyles.”

Ann sees the next step as working with kids around what their choices are, ideally through the curriculum.


www.coloradofarmtoschool.org

How Did BVSD Fund the Salad Bars?

Much of the planning work with Cooper was partially funded through a public-private partnership, the School Food Project (SFP), a unique task force of community businesses, nonprofits, activists, and district officials all dedicated to improving the quality of food served to children of the district. Local businesses and dozens of local Boulder Valley families have donated to the School Food Project. SFP set a goal of raising \$750,000 by the end of the 2010 – 11 school year. To Ann, the willingness to fund change signals a willingness to change, and that is necessary for project success.

How Do You Stock the Salad Bars?

Initially, Ann did a lot of training with school cooks about preparing foods for the salad bar. Now, she has found greater efficiency in running everything through a central kitchen where the salad bar ingredients are processed and sent off to the schools, ready to be served.



Photographs from thelunchbox.org

What's the Connection Between the Salad Bars and Local Food?

"There is a direct connection between salad bars and fresh food, but it may not always be local food," said Ann. In some times of the year in some parts of the country, salad bars can showcase local food, but incompatibility between the growing season and the school calendar make it difficult to rely exclusively on local food year-round. Ann enjoys highlighting locally sourced ingredients when they are available, but "local food is not the reason" for salad bars.

Who Are You Currently Sourcing From?

BVSD sources through the regular channels. The district rarely sources directly from farmers. Instead, the district directs local farmers into the existing supply chain. The district does encourage wholesaler Federal Produce to buy from the local producers, and the district has directly sourced produce from Beyond Organic CSA, Isabelle Farm, Food For Thought (for apples, peaches, pears), Ela Family Farms, and Wacky Apple.

Why Focus on Salad Bars?

Ann advocates salad bars because "it's a good first step" but she sees the bars as only part of needed systemic change in the school food system. "Putting in a salad bar gives kids choice, educates them on fresh food, but isn't systemic change. Putting salad bars next to chicken nuggets is problematic; kids won't choose the salad bars," said Ann. "So salad bars are not a systemic change, but they provide kids a chance to make the healthy choice and they begin the process of getting fresh vegetables into the schools."

To Ann, the really hard change is the center of the plate. At BVSD, salad bars are part of a changed menu that eliminates processed food. "For Farm to School to be sustainable and systemic we need to stop talking about fruits and veggies as the side dish and start talking about it at the center of the plate."



Photograph from Morguetile.org

Colorado School District Map



How Can Other Districts Acquire Funding to Follow BVSD's Lead?

Ann sees a district's willingness to prioritize funding for healthy foods as an indicator of its ability to succeed with healthy food projects. On average, a salad bar costs \$2,500 to install. "If they can't come up with that, they don't want the change," she says. At the same time, she advises cash-strapped districts to look for assistance from her foundation, among other sources. The foundation's "Great American Salad Bar Project" will donate salad bars to 500-600 schools across the country. ■

Learn More

The LunchBox

<http://www.thelunchbox.org/>

Great American Salad Bar Project: Healthy Tools to Help all Schools

<http://saladbarproject.org/>

Boulder Valley School District's School Food Project

<http://bvsd.org/schoolfoodproject>

Written by Scott Gossett *Zephyr Winds Communications*

Interviews Conducted by Lauren Tatarsky *Colorado Farm to School Intern*

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