

Op-Chart

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Lunch Line Redesign

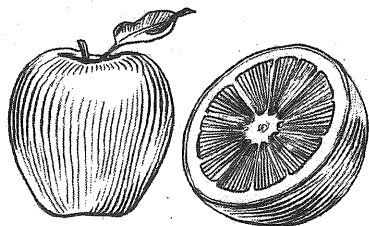
School cafeterias are much criticized for offering the kind of snack foods and desserts that contribute to childhood obesity. But banning junk food from cafeterias, as some schools have tried, or serving only escarole or tofu, can backfire. Students then skip lunch, bring in their own snacks or head out for fast food. We've even seen some pizzas delivered to a side door.

Children and teenagers resist heavy-handed nutritional policies — and the food that is associated with the heavy hand. No food is nutritious, after all, until it is actually eaten.

A smarter lunchroom wouldn't be draconian. Rather, it would nudge students toward making better choices on their own by changing the way their options are presented. One school we have observed in upstate New York, for instance, tripled the number of salads students bought simply by moving the salad bar away from the wall and placing it in front of the cash registers.

Experiments that we and other researchers have done in cafeterias at high schools, middle schools and summer camp programs, as well as in laboratories, have revealed many ways to use behavioral psychology to coax children to eat better. Here are a dozen such strategies that work without requiring drastic or expensive changes in school menus.

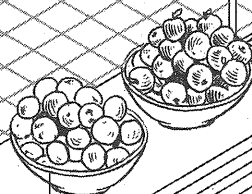
Putting apples and oranges in a fruit bowl, rather than a stainless steel pan, more than doubled fruit sales.



Placing nutritious foods like broccoli at the beginning of the lunch line, rather than in the middle, increased the amount students purchased by 10 percent to 15 percent.



Decreasing the size of bowls from 18 ounces to 14 ounces reduced the size of the average cereal serving at breakfast by 24 percent.



Pulling the salad bar away from the wall and putting it in front of the checkout register nearly tripled sales of salads.

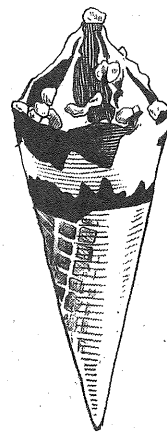
Moving the chocolate milk behind the plain milk led students to buy more plain milk.

A "cash for cookies" policy — that is, forbidding the use of lunch tickets for desserts — led students to buy 71 percent more fruit and 55 percent fewer desserts.



Giving healthy food choices more descriptive names — for example, "creamy corn" rather than "corn" — increased their sales by 27 percent.

Students given a choice between carrots and celery were much more likely to eat their vegetables than students forced to take only carrots.



Keeping ice cream in a freezer with a closed opaque top significantly reduced ice cream sales.

Requiring or encouraging the use of cafeteria trays increased vegetable consumption: students without trays eat 21 percent less salad but no less ice cream.

When cafeteria workers asked each child, "Do you want a salad?" salad sales increased by a third.

Creating a speedy "healthy express" checkout line for students who were not buying desserts and chips doubled the sales of healthy sandwiches.