

Tough Love in the School Lunch Line

Against the childhood obesity epidemic, parents and educators have a new ally: fingerprint biometric readers that can help them monitor and restrict kids' unhealthy school lunch purchases while encouraging and rewarding healthy ones

Along with the rest of the nation, parents and educators know that the childhood obesity epidemic is out of hand. What's been unclear to them is how to effectively deal with the problem. Now they have a new ally that's helping them to apply tough love in the school lunch line: fingerprint biometric readers linked to point-of-sale (POS) systems and home internet connections that can help them monitor and restrict kids' unhealthy lunch purchases while encouraging and rewarding healthy ones.

A heavyweight problem

Over twelve million kids in the U.S. are overweight. As obesity has doubled for preschool age kids and teens and tripled for pre-teens since the 1970s, a growing number of obese kids are now at risk of typically adult weight-related conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, and heart disease; and the number of American kids having obesity surgery has tripled.

"It's now common to hear experts declare that this is the first generation of kids who won't outlive their parents due to diet and inactivity," says Deanna McDuffie, a school wellness consultant based in Orlando, Florida. "This doesn't have to be, but it certainly may unless bad habits change."

While high fat, high sugar, convenience foods and a sedentary lifestyle are as much a problem for kids outside of school as in it, much of the furor focuses on what kids are scarfing down in school lunch lines, and for good reason.

"Busy parents are realizing that they don't really know what their kids are eating at school," says McDuffie. "Sure, there's a school lunch menu available. But the number one culprit is the a la carte menu, which isn't mandated to be nutritionally balanced. It often contains all the fat and sugar you can stuff into a kid; my daughter says the three food groups in middle school are pizza, french fries, and chocolate pastries."

Even though the recently passed Federal Wellness Mandate requires the appointment of wellness coordinators for all public schools, writing school wellness policy has proven to be no easy task. While banning unhealthy food from campus may seem like a reasonable option to some parents,

wellness coordinators, or school administrators, it has proven impractical so far for a number of reasons.

Part of the problem is that most school cafeterias, though nominally under the "school" umbrella, are actually contracted for profit entities driven by the market forces of supply and demand. If there's no demand, there's no profit; and cafeterias can actually go broke.

"Today kids are driving cafeteria food purchases; if they' don't see pizza and doughnuts they don't come in," explains McDuffie. "Cafeteria managers don't want it that way but don't know what else to do."

The presence of coin-operated vending machines on school campuses dispensing unhealthy items such as sodas, cookies, chips, candy, and sweetened drinks makes matters worse, according to McDuffie. She points out that loose cash in kids' pockets at school can also end up spent on off-campus fast food, fundraiser candy, or even illicit items such as tobacco and alcohol since it's unaccounted for.

"Though simply banning unhealthy food from school seems like an effective solution, it doesn't get at the root of the problem which is teaching kids to make better choices," says McDuffie. "Kids are bombarded by non-nutritious choices on and off-campus and need help to break bad habits, establish and maintain better ones."

Using technology to restrict poor lunch choices, encourage good ones

Toward an informed, healthy lifestyle, parents and educators have a new ally that's helping them to apply tough love in the school lunch line: fingerprint biometric readers linked to POS systems and home internet connections that can help them monitor and restrict kids' unhealthy lunch purchases while encouraging and rewarding healthy ones.

For example, one biometric school lunch program, (www.myschoolaccount.com) created by Food Service Solutions (FSS), a pioneer of biometric identification in school food service, has an online component that allows parents to pre-pay for school lunches as well as monitor their children's food choices. The technology even enables parents to restrict their children's choices to avoid 'special diet' conflicts or to prevent children from purchasing high fat, high sugar a la carte items.

Students place a forefinger on a small fingerscan reader by the school lunch register. In seconds, the system translates the electronic print into a mathematical pattern, discards the fingerprint image, and matches the pattern to the student's meal account information.

No fingerprint or image is saved because FSS's biometric software only scans the texture of the finger and plots points on a grid that mathematically correspond with ridges to achieve a unique positive identification.

Using the system, parents can view meal and a la carte purchases at home via the Internet for the last 30 days, day-by-day and item-by-item. Even breakfasts or snacks purchased at the cafeteria register show up. Via affiliated software, parents can specify prohibited purchases such as "no a la carte items," which an adult school cafeteria lunch worker would see "red-flagged" on the register and enforce at the time of purchase.

Because parents can monitor their child's lunch purchases and deposit money directly into their account at any time, they know exactly where, when, and how their money is spent. They know their money is spent on balanced school lunches or on specific a la carte choices rather than wasted on unhealthy or even illicit items.

"The first step in fighting childhood obesity is making kids aware of and accountable for what they're eating so they're not buying on impulse or habit," says McDuffie. "With biometric school lunch programs like myschoolaccount, parents know whether Jimmy had one personal pizza – typically containing 25 grams of fat – or three. They can prohibit such a la carte purchases, if necessary."

For parents who want to catch and acknowledge their kids for eating right, healthy food items such as salads, apples, and yogurts can also be flagged and tracked in a separate healthy food category in biometric school lunch programs such as FSS's. Using such programs, tracking, recognizing and rewarding healthy eating can be even more powerful when done by schools, and can be a powerful tool to fight obesity for federally required school wellness coordinators, according to McDuffie.

"Acknowledging healthy eating at the student, class, or grade level is now possible with programs like MySchoolAccount™, so kids, classes, or entire grades can be singled out for, say, eating three or more healthy items in a week," says McDuffie. "The technology can become a platform for integrating health and nutrition into the curriculum, using positive peer pressure, for instance, to praise or reward the second grade class that had the most documented success making wise food choices that week."

As any parent or educator knows, one reason it's difficult to get kids to eat healthy is their reluctance to try new, foods – call it the Green Eggs and Ham barrier. McDuffie envisions the fingerprint biometric technology helping here too, because if they try it and like it they'll seek more on their own.

"I advise schools to hold healthy food fairs using the technology," says McDuffie. "Kids could earn points for their class for each new healthy food they try, and healthy doesn't have to mean tasteless. Vanilla yogurt is a delicious substitute for ice cream, especially topped with blueberries, granola or trail mix; and apple slices are a great alternative to candy."

McDuffie points out that parents and educators truly help kids when they help them "acquire a taste" for healthy, low fat, low sugar foods they may have avoided before.

This takes repeated chances for kids to talk with and plan purchases with their parents, resulting in tastier, healthier lunch entries that kids actually look forward to eating.

"The poor diet component of obesity is the result of impulse and habit from a limited range of food choices," concludes McDuffie. "Today, parents and educators have the ability to teach, track, and recognize kids for making better, healthier choices that'll serve them for a lifetime – because our children, by all rights, should outlive us."

For more information about school lunch biometric identification systems, call (800) 425-1425; Fax (814) 941-7572; visit the website www.foodserve.com; or write to Food Services Solutions Inc. at 3101 Pleasant Valley Boulevard, Altoona, PA 16602.

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