

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 30: Nutrition in Public Schools

August 31, 2022

Summary: Oklahoma students are back in school, where kids and teens often get the nutrition and energy they need to learn and stay active from meals and snacks served in the cafeteria. In fact, school nutrition is crucial for the health and well-being of Oklahoma kids both during and outside of school hours. With school in session and Child Obesity Awareness Month arriving in September, Episode 30 of the TSET Better Health Podcast will focus on school and child nutrition with Jennifer Weber, executive director of child nutrition at the Oklahoma State Department of Education; Heather Steele and Sheila Russell with Tulsa Public Schools' Child Nutrition, and Valarie Carter, a classically trained chef, food writer and mom who shares her knowledge on Shape Your Future Healthy Kitchen segments on KJRH in Tulsa.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is James Tyree, health communication consultant at TSET.

Cate Howell: And this is Cate Howell, TSET podcast producer.

This is our 30th episode of the TSET Better Health Podcast and, I'm sad to say, my final episode. It's been a joy and a honor to be a part of TSET doing what I love to do, which is tell stories and create meaningful content. I look forward to watching TSET and this podcast grow as a supporter and a listener.

For today, let's talk about the role that public schools play in child nutrition. The fall 2022 semester is in session, which means kids are back in school and eating at least one if not two or even three meals a day of what our public schools serve them. Child nutrition is timely with the new school year and September being National Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, so we thought parents and community members ought to know what exactly goes into school menus and how to incorporate more nutritious options at home.

[1:11]

J. Tyree: That's right. We have a fantastic panel of guests for you today that cover this topic from a variety of angles. First, Jennifer Weber, Director of Child Nutrition Programs for Oklahoma Public Schools, will provide a big-picture look at programs that are in place to ensure our kids eat healthy at school. Then, Heather Steele and Sheila Russell with Tulsa Public Schools will walk us through the process of getting those healthy meals into our school cafeterias and to every child, no matter their family's economic status. And

finally, Chef Valarie Carter, lead chef instructor for OU-Tulsa's Culinary Medicine program, gives parents and caregivers some advice for taking the standard of nutritious food from the school cafeteria back into the kitchen at home, even for kids who may resist the effort!

But up first, let's welcome Jennifer Weber and explore how federal and state programs work together to put child nutrition into action.

[2:23]

[“Jazzy Mood” by Dope Cat]

Jennifer Weber: My name's Jennifer Weber and I'm the Executive Director of Child Nutrition Programs at the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

J. Tyree: We know that in addition to providing a well-rounded education, public schools have the added responsibility of providing balanced meals to our children. So how do they do this? What programs are in place to make this happen?

J. Weber: We do operate the National School Lunch School Breakfast program. We also operate the Child and Adult Care Food program, which is a program that licensed childcare centers and licensed adult daycare centers can apply for and be reimbursed for meals served to their participants. And we also operate the Summer Food Service program, which is a program that feeds children through the local school systems or through private non-profit organizations during the summer months when they aren't at school to get meals.

[3:16]

There's the After School Snack Program that is through the National School Lunch Program. So if a school district at the end of their day has a tutoring or enrichment or reading help, or even just some pretty broad enrichment programs that they're allowed to do, they can serve a snack to the children. So that helps them to get through that program with some nutrition.

J. Tyree: Besides the three major federal programs that provide nutritious meals to schoolkids, there are even more grant opportunities and smaller programs beneath those that help fill in the gaps. But how do these programs work, and what exactly are the nutritional standards of these meals?

[4:00]

J. Weber: Well, I think one important thing to know is with these programs, it is a federal program and with that comes federal regulations. And so schools can't just serve whatever they want. There are regulatory USDA minimum meal pattern requirements for all our programs. And that includes having to serve so much meat or so much grain a day. And

it has to be whole grain. It can't just be white bread. It's got to be whole grain bread and serving, and different vegetable subgroups.

So they are limited to the amount and what types of food they are allowed to serve. So they just can't serve chicken nuggets and french fries every day or pizza and french fries every day. And we know that kids like those foods, heck I like those foods sometimes too so, but everything in moderation they say. So there are things that parents do need to understand. There are strict guidelines that they have to follow and meet regulatory guidelines for meal patterns.

[04:57]

J. Tyree: That is a lot of great information. If you would like any more details, Jennifer recommends visiting the State Department of Education's website.

J. Weber: They can go to SDE.ok.gov. And when that main page comes up, there's a search button in the top right that they can put child nutrition programs and hit go, and it'll take them to our website. And it will tell a little bit about our programs. We do have a main line in child nutrition at the State Department of Education. And it's (405) 521-3327. And we have many, many people who would be more than qualified to speak to them or answer their questions.

[05:37]

[["Real Success"](#) by Pavel Yudin]

C. Howell: So that's a great breakdown of the federal and state infrastructures that are in place to facilitate child nutrition in public schools. But how are these programs utilized on the local level, and what opportunities do parents have to be involved? Here with that information are Heather Steele and Sheila Russell.

Heather Steele: My name is Heather Steel, and I am the community outreach coordinator for Tulsa Public School's Child Nutrition.

Sheila Russell: Hello, I'm Sheila Russell, and I've been with Child Nutrition for over 30 years, and I am an area manager for Child Nutrition on over 17 sites.

C. Howell: So there's a lot that goes into building a whole system of meal production for schools. Creating nutritional menus is one thing, but the logistics that go into facilitating those menus is another, as Heather explains.

[06:33]

H. Steele: So, I am actually a registered dietitian by trade. And how it works, we're building the menus, and it's kind of like cascade steps and processes to get them to a complete menu for each of those grade groups. We do have to follow federal regulations that are set by USDA, which is the United States Department of Agriculture, and there's a lot of

specifications in there. But, particularly with menus, you're looking at nutritional requirements, serving sizes, calories, saturated fat. Things like that.

We also have to acquire foods that are formulated and built for Child Nutrition programs. And, from there, we also take into consideration what the students are wanting. Those are our customers, so we're taking feedback from students to build our menus, and always kind of checking in on those requests or feedback throughout the school year to make adjustments.

And then, we look at things with Operation. So, do we have the space to produce certain things? Do we have the equipment? Do we have the staffing? Those are all things you have to consider whenever you're looking at a menu.

[07:45]

C. Howell: Like I said, it's a lot. So what specifically goes on that menu? How do schools follow the USDA requirements and provide meals that kids will actually eat and enjoy? Sheila says a lot of that information comes from the students themselves.

S. Russell: We also send out surveys and one-on-one with the children to let them get their voice back of what they like and what they don't like, and how we can improve our operations and our food choices in the future for them.

We have a lot more fruit. We did do a survey and they love the fruit cups, they love the mixed fruit. The food selections are a lot different now. We have a lot of whole grains, we're very low on sugar. Cereal is one of the most popular items that they'll pick if they do the survey. But, we accommodated the cereal option with food that is healthy and grains that are healthy for them. Less sugar. And they like that.

The lunches that they like, they love yogurts. They love our yogurt parfaits. They're requesting salads more, and more vegetables and fruit on the lines. So, a big difference than what I saw when we first started.

[09:00]

C. Howell: These are all great, healthy options. But what about families who may struggle to pay for school meals? What options and opportunities are there for them?

H. Steele: So, free and reduced priced meals are a great opportunity for the students to be able to access those nutritious meals during the school day. It's really hard to come to school if you're hungry. And you're not able to sit and focus and think about school and learning if you don't have that fuel for your brain to start with. So, it's really important we have those opportunities for families to fill out our free and reduced meal application to be able to be eligible to receive those meals if they need them.

[09:40]

I always say, even if you're not participating in the meal program, we certainly hope you would join us in the cafeteria for a meal. It is still important to apply for those because those free and reduced meal applications can help obtain additional funding for your schools, and for families. It can open opportunities for them to get discounted prices for maybe internet services, or testing, or even sports. So, those are some big pieces of it, and I would like to add: this is the first school year since the pandemic that families are applying for free and reduced meal applications to participate in the meal programs. So, the last two years, it has been all students eat free, even without a free and reduced meal application, or not dependent on income status. So, certainly, it's really important this school year to send in free and reduced applications. And it only takes a few minutes to complete, and it is completely confidential as well. So, we're not... Even if your child got a free and reduced status for their meals, when they come to the cafeteria line, we won't identify them on any sort of benefits program at all.

[10:56]

[“[Feeling Renewed](#)” by Elliot Middleton]

- C. Howell: At the end of the day, this is a big partnership between state and federal agencies and local schools, parents and students to ensure that our kids stay nourished both in and out of school – and that is such an important and fulfilling mission.
- S. Russell: Today was our first day back to school, it was really neat to see them all on their brand new tennis shoes and their little backpacks, and coming in and sharing breakfast and lunch with us. And I just love the children. I also like working with the community and providing meals and a service to them. This year, so far, we've done over... We have done a lot of meals. We've done over 130,000 lunches, and over 83,000 breakfasts to our community children during the summer.
- H. Steele: My favorite part is the kids. That's why I'm here is to feed the kids. And, I think my biggest piece that's incredibly rewarding to me is connecting kids and families with resources to hopefully end childhood hunger. That's something I just think is really hard to do anything else in life and be successful if you're hungry. And so, just finding equitable solutions to ending hunger is really important to me.

[12:22]

[“[Sunny Walk](#)” by Babel]

- J. Tyree: It is inspiring to hear directly from dedicated school nutrition leaders, who work hard to make sure our kids eat filling, nutritious meals every day. But it's also up to us parents to provide a balanced diet at home, which can be tricky to say the least. Here with some tips and insight is Chef Valarie Carter, a friend and partner with TSET's Shape Your Future program.

[12:50]

Valarie Carter: I'm Valarie Carter and I am the lead chef instructor for OU culinary medicine on the Tulsa campus. I taught at OSUIT for a few years, and I knew then that I really wanted to use my culinary skills to try to help make a change in families, and the kind of healthy cooking or not healthy cooking that they were doing. And so I kind of got started doing that.

So I worked at OSUIT for five years, and then I took a little break when I was starting my family. After that, I worked for an organization called Cooking for Kids, which is a USDA grant program through Oklahoma State University. And so chefs would go into public school cafeterias and help the school lunch ladies, and I say that lovingly, I love the lunch ladies, just to follow those USDA guidelines and to make really delicious food and help kids like better food, healthier food. And so that kind of segued into this culinary medicine, which I'm doing now at OU.

[14:00]

J. Tyree: Chef Valarie devotes her time and passion not only to cooking, but also to being a mom – and she knows firsthand the challenges parents can face when trying to create a balanced diet for their children that will also appeal to them.

V. Carter: When I hear a mom or dad say that they don't like to cook, I totally understand that. If their experience with cooking is, "I've been working all day, I haven't gone to the grocery store yet, I have to get home, cook this food. We probably have soccer practice, I know we have homework, and I've got to slap out some food that's supposed to be healthy, and hopefully my kids are going to like it enough to eat it." And a lot of times we know that doesn't necessarily happen. So I really understand and empathize with that parent who's having to do that, because I know in my own family, we're usually packed in the evenings with activities. And I mean, my kids are normal kids. They're 11 and 13 and they have their different food preferences, and those change all the time. So I definitely understand, again, empathize with parents who are going through this.

[15:07]

My number one piece of advice would be don't stop trying. There's research out there that suggests that trying foods, and you can find different research that suggest different numbers, but anywhere between 10 and 17 times to try a food, to actually get a preference for that food. If your child tries broccoli one time and says they don't like it, we have to really rethink that and say, "Well, why doesn't the child like this?" Well, it could be just because they're used to eating Cheetos, I don't know. Or they just don't have any exposure to broccoli. And then the other thing about that is I would make sure to try all the cooking methods. So carrots, for example. I have two kids, and I have one child that likes raw carrots and one child that only likes cooked carrots. So don't discount carrots all together. And I think the same thing goes for cooked carrots or raw carrots. Don't say, "Oh, well, now I know that my child only likes cooked carrots." You have to keep trying with those raw carrots so that they really develop a preference for all types of food.

[16:09]

J. Tyree: So there's going to be some experimentation and creative thinking involved in this process. But what are some simple, practical choices parents and kids can make right now?

V. Carter: Make sure and offer things that are filled with fiber. So the more fiber something has, the more it's going to fill you up. So an apple is going to fill you up more than, say, apple sauce, because it still is retaining all of that fiber and all of that water and has the ability to fill you up for a longer period of time. Protein-rich foods, beans are an excellent example of trying to get at least one serving of beans in every day, because they are protein rich and they are fiber rich. So really trying to introduce those things that really take up a lot of room in your tummy. Broccoli, cauliflower, beans, and protein-rich foods like eggs. Those also are excellent choices.

[17:08]

As far as liking veggies, I would say that presenting them often and in lots of different preparations. Also, kids learn from what we do. And so if I say, "Oh, I'm really not a salad eater," I'm probably not going to present salad as often. I say salad meaning a green salad. And then my kids are going to emulate me. They're going to say, "Oh, we're just not a salad family." And so really try to, as a parent, take away some of those ideas that you have about yourself that you think you don't like this, that, or the other, but maybe you think you don't like asparagus because when you had it as a kid, it was canned asparagus, and it was terrible, because it kind of is sometimes. So really try to set a good example for your kids in that way.

[17:58]

[“[Wonderfully Optimistic](#)” by Jack Pierce]

J. Tyree: Chef Valarie's partnership with Shape Your Future is about cooking and preparing delicious and nutrition meals at home as easy as possible.

V. Carter: OU Culinary Medicine has part partnered with TSET Shape your Future and KJRH. On KJRH, that's channel two in Tulsa, we have a healthy cooking segment that airs every Sunday in the 8:00 AM hour and every Monday in the noon news hour. It's a repeat on Monday of what was aired on Sunday. We try to focus on affordable, easy to make family friendly meals and recipes that families can really put into practice in their home. We try to make the ingredients, things that you can get at Walmart, or even Dollar General sometimes, just kind of depends on where you live, but we want these to be things that families can enjoy together, cook together. And again, we try to introduce some things that families are maybe not as familiar with.

[19:02]

So, anyway, those air twice a week, and this is starting our third year actually. What I really hope for on those segments... We do provide a recipe document that you can find on the website and that's even on the KJRH websites.

What I really hope to impart is cooking skills and cooking methods so that you're not tethered to a recipe. To me, it makes cooking so much harder to have to follow a recipe and read every single word. If I can do an overview of that recipe, but I know what all of those keywords and the cooking jargon means, then it makes that cooking so much easier. I really hope that people learn how to roast, how to sauté, what does it mean to mince or to small dice, so that when they are actually going through the process, it's a lot easier.

I would say just don't give up. It's not a throw the baby out with the bath water mentality of, "oh, I didn't cook any this week, and so I'm just not cut out for this." Keep trying, keep buying those healthy foods, keep implementing them in your meals, and keep presenting those to your children. Keep presenting them to yourself so that you build those habits and those food preferences that are the healthiest for your family.

[20:17]

J. Tyree: You can find Chef Valarie's recipes and so much more online at ShapeYourFutureOK.com. If you have any questions about child nutrition at your local public school, you can visit the Oklahoma State Department of Education at SDE.OK.gov and search for child nutrition programs. There you can also find out information about enrolling in the free and reduced lunch program and other opportunities to increase your child's access to healthy meals.

Now, turning back to you, Cate, the past 2½ years spent working with you on the TSET Better Health Podcast – which was your idea – has been so much fun. Thanks for the time and effort you put into this labor of love for Oklahomans.

[21:14]

C. Howell: Thank you so much, James. It's been such a pleasure being your co-host and producer. TSET is truly a remarkable agency that spends every ounce of effort working to improve and even save the lives of all Oklahomans, and I couldn't be prouder to have spent three years being a part of that mission.

As always, you can find more episodes of Better Health at TSET.OK.gov/podcast or wherever you listen to podcasts, and please, tune in next month for even more great information about public health and prevention in Oklahoma. So, this may be goodbye for me, but...

J. Tyree: Until next time, this is still James Tyree –

C. Howell: And Cate Howell –

J. Tyree: Wishing you peace –

C. Howell: – and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[22:19]