

## FOOD

# THE CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL LUNCH

York cafeteria's try to serve healthy and source locally

By **SARAH GRANT**  
The York Independent

Imagine trying to work your way through a maze... up to your knees in mud... while juggling three eggs.

This is obviously an analogy, but it also describes the challenges and restrictions that Doris Demers, Director of School Nutrition for York and Kittery schools, creatively surmounts in her job.

The mud must be the government restrictions as to food resources that they will fund. The labyrinth is full of political dead ends, red tape and dietary guidelines set up by the USDA and the Institute of Medicine that restrict fats and sugars in school lunch programs and makes real "suggestions" as to what a food director must purchase and serve children of various ages and at specific times of the day.

The juggling act involves removing deleterious, empty-calorie foods that kids love such as French fries, sugary, high fat ice cream novelties, and fried potato chips while enticing them to purchase new choices, such as sweet potato fries, frozen 100 percent juice bars, and baked potato chips.

You see, she can't lose their interest because the kids are the customers of the in-school restaurants that Doris runs. She needs their participation to keep the establishments in business. The goal at the end of the maze is good and tasty nutrition for all the kids from ages 5 to 18 all day long.

Doris never loses sight of this goal. She attains it with every entrée, snack and breakfast served at the schools under her supervision every day. She accomplishes all of this with a very positive attitude.

Doris, a three-time winner of the Maine School Nutrition Award, and a continuing student of the Dietary Technical Program at SMCC, considers herself lucky. She has the dedicated support of two school districts that let balance her budget creatively when she buys local products instead of choosing from the often frozen commodities subsidized by the U.S. government, who may, for example

send her potatoes from Idaho or apples from Washington.

That is frustrating for someone who not only hears the beat of the buy-local drum, but also sings in the chorus. The nourishing lunches Doris designs often cost \$4 each, but lunch fees average less than \$2.10 per student. She resourcefully balances her total budget with profits from catering sales (for lunch meetings and the like) and a la carte (snacks and desserts) cafeteria sales.

Doris started her juggling act of kids' menu choices in 2003, when as a cafeteria manager, who was mindful of the obesity problem among kids and the issue of empty calories in school foods, quietly began to replace some of the worst offenders with worthy substitutes.

The candy bars, sugary cookies, sodas and white bread sandwiches were phased out. Now, in their places are low fat, low sugar granola snacks, 51 percent whole grain low sugar cookies, 100 percent fruit juice and whole wheat bread, multigrain bagels and even whole wheat cinnamon buns that are startlingly low on fat and sugar but both the kids and teachers like them.

Whenever possible, Doris buys brand names such as Arrezio, Froz Fruit and Hershey, who are suppliers of new frozen confections that meet or exceed federal guidelines and now occupy the ice cream freezer in the caf.

She says, "Kids like brand names. They are foods they recognize from home or the store. Brand names represent consistent quality, and consistency is very important when you are trying to please kids." Or, anyone. Hershey makes the 2.5 ounce ice cream sandwich the kids may opt to buy. "Portion control is key," say Doris. "I can allow them to opt for an ice cream sandwich as a treat, if its size fits into the 35-10-35 (percent of calories from fat, saturated fat, and total sugar) ratio that is required."

Locally speaking, Doris has managed to keep all Oakhurst milk products and Giles Orchard apples that come in from Alfred all during the school year. Last year, a York farmer planted an entire field of potatoes just



SARAH GRANT PHOTO

In York, the kids seem to prefer local Archer Angus burgers hands-down versus USDA commodity varieties.

for our schools and Doris' programs, and the kids enjoyed all manner of Maine potatoes throughout the school year.

Doris particularly favors baked potatoes because they remain whole, low fat and provide all the vitamins and minerals that the entire potato can offer. Sadly, this past season, the local crop failed, so potato products are now coming from wherever the federal government deems appropriate.

This year, the cafeteria menu accomplishment that makes Doris the most proud is the introduction of pasture-raised beef patties from Archer Angus in Farmington, Maine. The beef patties are an excellent, local product (see "Where's the Beef?" on Page 11) and are usually available only from select food markets, some restaurants and farmers' markets. The hamburgers are delivered directly by Ray Buck, who owns Archer Angus.

I was fortunate to witness lunch in York Middle School on burger day. Doris and I took an informal straw poll as the kids added condiments to the burgers just outside the kitchen. "These are waaay better than last years' burgers." "I like these burgers a lot," were among the positive-only comments we heard from the kids. I would guess that more than half of the trays that exited the kitchen were carrying Archer Angus hamburgers, and beyond the crumpled foil that wrapped the burgers, no vestige of them came back at the end of lunch.

The burgers are much more expensive than the commodity burgers offered by the USDA and worth every penny. Ray Buck has offered a \$50 credit to the schools for purchase of more patties with every side of beef he sells

to parents or anyone who asks for that school benefit.

One or more families can split a side and fill one or more freezers with all cuts of top quality, grass-fed, Angus beef: steaks, roasts, burgers, tenderloin, stew meat, hamburger, stock bones and marrowbones for about \$4.55/lb. and benefit the school lunch program, too. Take that, supermarkets! Call Ray Buck at 491-6354 for details and ordering.

Doris Demers plans to do much more with local farms as she meets more farmers who are interested in supporting this program. Right now, she fills out salad bars in all of her schools with dark leafy greens mixed with other lettuces and all types of colorful produce options in accompanying salad bar pans, including black beans and whole fruit.

Most farms grow excess vegetables and those that do not meet the cosmetic expectations of market customers. The schools are a great way to market these extra items. Of course, the schools are interested in tax-deductible produce donations, but because of Doris' innovative budget stretching; they are also in a position to buy.

"It doesn't matter to me if a tomato or a pepper isn't perfect to look at. We'll just dice it up and use it in the lunches," says Doris. "The more local a fruit or vegetable, the fresher it is because it doesn't have to travel across the country." Doris always has her eye on the goal of the best possible nutrition for our kids.

To find out more about what's new the local school lunch program, or to check out the latest lunch menu, go to [yorkschoools.org/~lunches/](http://yorkschoools.org/~lunches/).



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