

Serving Up Health and Happiness

Spotlight on Sheila Hoyt,
Cook Manager at Horseheads Intermediate & Middle Schools



After 12 years in school kitchens, Sheila Hoyt had learned a thing or two about school food.

After 12 years in school kitchens, Sheila Hoyt had learned a thing or two about school food. Working her way up the ladder from a substitute worker to cook manager of two schools (Horseheads Intermediate and Middle Schools in Horseheads, NY) taught her how to manage staff, run a clean and efficient kitchen, and serve nutritious meals to 800 children per day. But attending a staff development workshop with trainers from

the Cornell B.E.N. Center “opened [her] eyes” to how small changes in the lunchroom environment “really affect how kids look at lunch and interact with the staff” and can encourage kids to take, eat, and enjoy

Serving Up Health and Happiness

continued

healthier lunch options. Thanks to some easy, inexpensive changes to her lunchroom décor and routines, she happily reports that “the kids enjoy us, they don’t think of us as mean old lunch ladies. They are really excited and say ‘This is really cool!’ and ‘Can we do this every day?’ They even invite me to sit with them!”

“The kids enjoy us, they don’t think of us as mean old lunch ladies. They are really excited and say ‘This is really cool!’ and ‘Can we do this every day?’ They even invite me to sit with them!”

The Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (B.E.N. Center) studies how the lunchroom environment influences students’ food choices in school. In spring 2011, during a workshop

with B.E.N. Center trainers, Sheila was inspired by the “common sense” ideas and implemented about a dozen of them in her two lunchrooms, adding a few ideas of her own—with terrific success. The students ate more fruits and vegetables and the relationship between lunchroom staff members and the students greatly improved. This delighted Dr. Brian Wansink, whose mission in founding the B.E.N. Center was to empower schools and districts to revitalize their lunchrooms. He insists, “These changes are so easy and every school can make a couple of changes and see their kids eat healthier.”

Sheila received lots of positive feedback from parents and school staff, who have come to check out the lunchrooms’ new look and learn about the healthy foods offered there. To reach out to families, Sheila made a display for Back-to-School Night and hosted an open house. Administrators say the kids “are really responding.” Each year, her focus is on catching the incoming 5th graders’ attention; “once you hook them,” she says, “they keep working with you and carry your message into the next grades.”

What excites Sheila most about the coming school year? “All the new staff and training—we need to know we are not all alone, we are a team, let’s help each other out and keep it new. You guys [at the B.E.N. Center] got me rolling.”

Read more: SmarterLunchrooms.org



Easy & Inexpensive Ways to Give Your Lunchroom a Makeover

Add color! Display fruits and veggies in colorful trays or bowls and use colorful linens to line shelves and metal pans. Add colorful straw holders, utensils, and décor.

Add contrast: Mix different fruits (in cups or handheld) so the colors play off of each other: red grapes next to peaches, green apples next to oranges.

Show, don't tell: Sheila created "Today's Special" and "Coming Tomorrow" **signs** with interchangeable pictures of popular items. The kids see what is offered, it interests them, and they plan to buy lunch the next day. It also lets the kids decide earlier what they'll order, so the line moves faster. Bonus: It's a great way to advertise special options, such as vegetarian entrées and local veggie sides. She also uses **plastic food models** for color and to advertise foods offered behind glass.

Put target items at eye level: "We got new snack racks (for free!) and we set signs advertising each day's meals right where the kids can see them."

Keep it new: Add fresh or artificial flowers, seasonal decorations, and special food items. Change it up regularly.

Offer healthy treats: "The most popular new item was the 100%-fruit-juice slushie machine. The kids asked, and we got it for them, and they love it. We're getting another this year. The kids are really happy, and it's 100% fruit juice."

Be a good listener: Make an opinion box and ask for feedback from students and other school community members. Sheila did this, then implemented the most popular feasible ideas. She also talked to kids at their lunch tables.

- **Hint: Ask for specific feedback:** What foods exactly do you like or dislike? What would you like to see added to the menu, and why?
- **Explain:** Let kids know what you can and can't work on. "Lots of kids didn't understand why we can't just serve bacon cheeseburgers every day. I explained about the dietary guidelines and gave them other options we could try—like spicy chicken nuggets—and they were more eager to try the other new foods instead."