

## Students must eat well to learn, but schools need to do more than offer nutritious food



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Ten years ago, Gabriella Wilday was a busy mom with a daughter in first grade and two younger twins. Packing a daily lunch for her daughter was a chore.

So Wilday switched to using the school's institutional lunch provider. But she soon noticed a change in her daughter.

She wasn't eating much of the school lunches, which were not fresh, Wilday said. She would come home and have meltdowns.

The experience led Wilday to start her own business, No Fuss Lunch, a school meal service that she says offers fresh, healthful foods with no added sugars or corn syrup.

"I really believe that there is a connection between what children are eating for lunch and how they're performing academically after lunch," Wilday said. She described No Fuss Lunch as a partner with schools to help students excel.



Gabriella Wilday, the owner and Founder of No Fuss Lunch, in the kitchen of her business in Hawthorne, N.J. on Monday Dec. 13, 2021. No Fuss Lunch provides lunch for school children. *Tariq Zehawi/NorthJersey.com*

Research suggests that the quality of a school lunch affects students' academic performance and well-being. The gastrointestinal system and brain are intimately connected, and both children and adults are affected by what is put in the body.

"The gut is like the second brain," said psychotherapist Paul Singleton, part of the Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective, a national nonprofit organization committed to improving the health of Black communities.

"For instance, the neurotransmitter serotonin, responsible for regulating mood — about 90% of that is produced in the small intestine," Singleton said.

It's important for schools to recognize the integral role they have in maintaining nutritional health, experts say. But putting some broccoli rabe on the lunch tray is not the answer. It has to be something the kids want to eat.



Maria Zambon prepares salads at No Fuss Lunch for school children at their kitchen in Hawthorne, N.J. on Monday Dec. 13, 2021. *Tariq Zehawi/NorthJersey.com*

Otherwise, they'll throw it out.

“There's no way that you can implement a healthy lunch program or nutritious lunch program without education,” said Stacey Antine, a registered nutritionist and founder of Ridgewood-based Health Barn. “Kids have to feel like it was their idea.”

Antine said kids need to try something at least eight times for it to stick, because changing kids' tastes requires a change in taste buds.

In 2005, Antine opened Health Barn, a hands-on healthy lifestyle center with the motto “strong bodies, healthy minds.”

“We know especially now that children are suffering with mental health” — and when you eat healthy food, you feel better, she said.

Health Barn provides education via school assemblies and after-school programs that illustrate the importance of eating healthy foods such as fruits, whole grains and lean proteins. Antine believes it's something kids should have fun with.

For example, at a school assembly in Tenafly, students taste-tested a smoothie bar and shared their critiques with their peers. At Garfield Middle School, she held "super salad bar" demonstrations after the school began offering salads in the cafeteria but students weren't biting.



Laugham School students make yogurt parfaits in a lesson in nutrition during an after school program with the Health Barn's Pooja Patel on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, in Tenafly. *Danielle Parhizkaran/NorthJersey.com*

"I love working with the kids. I love when they get up there and try things for the first time, like the edamame, and they discover," Antine said.

At Saint John's Academy in Hillsdale, Principal Suzanne Socha said the administration is focused on the idea of the "whole child." Everyone talks about lifelong learners, Socha said, but lifelong wellness should also be part of the conversation.

Providing a healthy meal is a "very cost-effective way to improve student learning," she said.

"We worry so much right now about test scores, but we also should be worrying about what the kids are having at lunchtime," she said. "Eating whole meals will help students sustain their day."



Maugham School students make yogurt parfaits in a lesson in nutrition during an after school program with the Health Barn's Pooja Patel on Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021, in Tenafly. *Danielle Parhizkaran/NorthJersey.com*

If students are eating a lot of sugar and carbohydrates and are not able to have recess to get that energy out, then trying to get them to sit in class and focus on instruction can

be futile, said Singleton, the psychotherapist. That just fosters a sense of defeat. "They feel like they cannot learn," he said.

Antine suggests that two foods that should be eliminated from school menus are chocolate milk and bagels with butter, because of the low nutritional value and high sugar content. A bagel with turkey or egg is better, she said, but the transition must be gradual. A complete menu overhaul is usually unsuccessful.

Processed foods have a tendency to increase distractibility, which may lead to irritability and increased social conflict, she said.

"The most important thing is that we try to get the freshest food possible," Antine said, "food that requires less reheat and more preparation."

Beyond the immediate effects, there are long-term consequences to eating overly processed foods that are high in sugar. The habit can predispose children to heart disease, diabetes and a host of health problems, Antine said, noting that the pandemic highlighted the dangers of those conditions.



At Ho-Ho-Kus Public School, Principal Martha Walsh said students are taught about the whole plate and how food relates to heart health. “It’s really a mixture of not only eating healthy food, but also exercising appropriately for whatever age level,” Walsh said.



Ho-Ho-Kus Public school offers No Fuss Lunch to help students and faculty eat a healthy lunch. No Fuss Lunch offers sun butter for those with peanut allergies. Shown on Wednesday Dec. 15, 2021.

The schools in Ho-Ho-Kus and Hillsdale both partner with Wilday's No Fuss Lunch. The provider emphasizes local, organic foods and avoids fruits and vegetables that are known to be exposed to excessive amounts of pesticides.

"It is really important to develop health habits early on in life so that you are drinking enough water and eating foods that are high in fiber early on, so that you have that habit," Singleton said.

The fact is, healthier food often costs more. That can be a barrier in many districts.

"I mean, it really is about money," Antine said.

Wilday said, "I can't say that our lunches are 100% organic, because, in some cases, you know, the cost far outweighs what parents are willing to pay."



To participate in Health Barn's assembly program costs about \$975, with food included. It also offers after-school culinary nutrition enrichment programs in Closter and Tenafly's Maugham School.

No Fuss Lunch is not funded by schools but paid for by parents, who order online. Menu options include baked ziti, tomato sauce from scratch, and Bell & Evans chicken tenders.

"We need to do better with the food served for all children, and especially since we know that schools are not only learning centers, but they're feeding centers," Antine said.

Antine, who also runs a nonprofit that addresses food insecurity, said she doesn't want to criticize schools, because she recognizes that finances are tight in many districts and that the cost of food has skyrocketed since the pandemic began.

There is a perception that a school lunch will cost \$3.50, "and it's going to be restaurant-quality, and it's just not even doable, so it's a juggling act," Wilday said.

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