

## What's for Lunch? by Celia Hagert

We all probably harbor at least one bad memory of the school cafeteria. I, for one, am convinced to this day that a particularly scary bowl of pudding gave me mumps in the second grade.

School lunch may not be perfect, but it's definitely a whole lot better than when we were kids. In fact, if you take a close look at what's on the lunch menu today, you might be surprised by just how much better.

Texas actually has one of the strictest school nutrition policies in the country, with AISD way ahead of the game in the fight to improve children's health through better nutrition. Though federal regulations set minimum standards for the content of school meals, as well as other food and drink sold on campus, Texas takes it a step further.

Texas implemented its model School Food Nutrition Policy in 2004 as part of a broader school wellness effort designed, in part, to address the crisis of childhood obesity in Texas. More than 35 percent of Texas children are considered overweight or obese, which is significantly higher than the nation as a whole.

In elementary schools, menus must adhere to specific portion sizes, limit the fat content of individual items, include fruits and/or vegetables daily – fresh whenever possible – and offer low fat or skim milk as an option.

The policy also covers foods served outside of the lunchroom, including in vending machines and when fundraising. Elementary schools are not allowed to serve “competitive” foods (so named because they are procured competitively and because they compete with school lunch) anywhere on campus until the end of the day. AISD has eliminated drink vending machines entirely.

Of course, every policy has its exceptions. For example, you can still bring cupcakes to school for your kid's birthday, though please not during lunch-

time. You have the Texas Legislature to thank for this. Lawmakers passed the “safe cupcake amendment” in 2003 in response to lobbying from parents outraged over the state's perceived assault on the little treat as American as apple pie. (For more on the cupcake controversy, read the New York Times article, “Don't Even Think of Touching That Cupcake,” from 9/23/07).

Even with all of these improvements, much work remains to make school lunch as healthy and appealing as what you might serve at home. The biggest barrier to making these changes is cost. The federal government subsidizes school meals on a sliding scale (according to a child's family income), providing between .23¢ and \$2.64 per lunch served, and limits the amounts schools can charge students. The district expects school food service departments to be self-sufficient, meaning this money must cover not only the cost of the meal, but also overhead (staff salaries, equipment, electricity, etc.) So be sure to thank Mrs. McCloud (the director of food service for Barton Hills) the next time you see her for the miracle she works every day in the cafeteria.

Another big challenge is serving food that kids will eat. The best read on this is the New Yorker article “The Lunchroom Rebellion” (9/4/2006), which tells the hilarious story of the executive chef hired by the Berkeley Public Schools to spruce up their lunch menu. (The kids threaten to go on a hunger strike when she takes away their grilled cheese sandwiches, and respond with an angry petition to the vegetarian pizza. She tries hiding the veggies beneath the cheese, but the kids root them out).

One thing to remember is that although the state sets the nutrition standards, decisions about which foods to serve and their preparation are made locally. If you want to have input on these choices, think about joining the School Health Advisory Council, which advises the school board on nutrition and wellness policies (see [www.austinisd.org/schools/shac/](http://www.austinisd.org/schools/shac/)). For more about the Texas' school nutrition policy, see [www.squaremeals.org](http://www.squaremeals.org).