

## **HEALTHY SCHOOLS PROGRAM:**

## HEALTHIER SCHOOL MEALS SUCCESS STORY

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, signed into law in December 2010, charged the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) with updating school food nutrition standards to reflect the latest nutrition science. Updates to the nutrition standards for school meals went into effect at the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, and schools across the country have been making changes to provide students with healthier choices. The law also provides schools with increased funding, training, and technical assistance to meet the new meals standards; calls for stronger local wellness policies, more transparency, and improved compliance measures; and strengthens USDA's commitment to other nutrition and wellness programs. In addition, USDA recently updated the standards for snacks and beverages sold outside of meals—in school stores, à la carte lines, and vending machines. These updated standards will go into effect at the beginning of the 2014-15 school year.

Ankeny, Iowa

Ankeny, lowa, is just north of the capital Des Moines, and the fast-growing Ankeny Community School District has been focused on creating healthy schools for some time. Two years ago, the Iowa Department of Education (DoE) implemented the state's own Healthy Kids Act, which updated state nutrition standards for school meals, snacks and beverages. In addition, several local schools have been participating in the Healthy Schools Program of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, through which they receive tools and support to adopt best practices for creating environments to promote nutrition and physical activity. The schools are working to meet stringent criteria established by the Alliance and the HealthierUS School Challenge, a voluntary USDA program that recognizes schools for creating healthy environments.

Ankeny's Food Service Director Lynn Swinger has found that open lines of communication with students, staff, and parents have been essential to helping her implement the updated federal nutrition standards for school meals. In addition, the DoE has provided Swinger and other food service directors in the state with information and support.

During the transition, Swinger has conducted taste tests with students and offered sample food items. The students not only provided valuable feedback on their preferences, but in doing so became invested in the change process. Swinger noted it was important for kids to understand the guidelines weren't changed just for the sake of change, but because the new meals will be healthier for all students.

Swinger also worked with food service and other school staff to approach the new nutrition guidelines from a positive perspective. She spoke at staff meetings and Parent Teacher Organization gatherings, and posted information on the school district's website. She understood the need to address people's confusion about the changes while continuing to implement them. Swinger suggests that schools, "be creative in thinking about ways to accommodate—don't expect to get it right the first time."

Swinger's hard work has paid off. Although the district saw a slight decrease in school meal participation at the beginning of the school year, participation is generally holding steady now. She's even winning converts. One teacher began eating school lunches this year because the healthier meals now include more fruits and vegetables.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, founded by the American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation, works to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity and to empower kids to develop lifelong, healthy habits. The Alliance works with schools, companies, community organizations, healthcare professionals and families to transform the conditions and systems that lead to healthier children.

To learn more and join the movement, visit HealthierGeneration.org.

