

# Stories from the Field: Montana

## From French Fries to Fruit Cups— Creating Healthier Kid’s Menus

**W**hat is the magic in Montana that keeps kids lean? It is a mystery health officials would like to solve as they admit most states are failing to meet federal goals for childhood obesity.

Although 12% of U.S. high school students were obese in 2009 according to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 10% of Montana high school students were obese. Montana parents, residents, and health advocates want to do something about it before it gets worse in their state.

So, in a sweeping valley in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, restaurant owners in Gallatin County, Montana decided to make a shift for the better. With the help of Robin Mochi, Nutrition and Physical Activity Coordinator for the Montana Nutrition and Physical Activity Program (MT NAPA), restaurant managers placed two or more healthy items on their kids’ menus.

“The transition wasn’t an easy one,” recalled Mochi. With the help of an intern, the telephone book, and Chamber of Commerce lists, she identified and sent letters to 95 restaurants in Gallatin County. The letters solicited managers’ interest in adding healthier items to their kids’ menus. “No one responded to the letter. It was quite surprising,” said Mochi. When asked how she overcame the barrier, Mochi responded, “It was the personal contact. I had to visit each restaurant in person sometimes. During the visits, some restaurant managers told me that they had received my letter and were interested, but were just too busy to respond. Comments like ‘I’ve been meaning to call you’ were common.”

Twenty-four restaurant managers allowed Mochi to review their menus. Using the Nutrition Environment Measures Study in Restaurants (NEMS-R) assessment tool allowed her to set reasonable guidelines for determining just how healthy a restaurant’s kids’ menu was. The menu had to include two or more servings of fruit and vegetables and/or low fat milk. Fruit options could be fresh, frozen, or canned but they couldn’t be canned in heavy syrup or juices. To make the transition a little easier, eateries were encouraged to use items already in their inventories to create the healthy choices; this strategy received positive feedback. In general, managers decided to add fruits and vegetables to current menu items; for example, they added lettuce and tomato to a ham sandwich or fruit to oatmeal. Others decided to reduce adult portion sizes into kid friendly sizes, offer salad instead of French fries or provide fruit cups instead of ice cream. “We discovered



that it is very important to help each restaurant work with ingredients it already has or can get easily," Mochi said. "If a restaurant was to order a special, perishable item and the item did not sell, the restaurant would be likely to remove it from the menu."

MT NAPA graphic designers reviewed and tailored menus. They also created other promotional materials including newspaper stories and a directory of restaurants that provide healthy menu options for kids. MT NAPA staff distributed the directory through the Chamber of Commerce, county schools, and the Internet. Based on calls and e-mails from parents, the directory was viewed favorably by county residents. Although most restaurants did not keep sales records, anecdotal reports revealed that the fruit items were popular among kids.

Meanwhile, MT NAPA program administrators like Ninia Baehr continue to seek partners in the fields of education, transportation, planning, business, Extension Services, agriculture, parks and recreation, health care, tribal organizations, civic organizations and advocacy groups. "I think we have had some success in our pilot project," Baehr said. "If we can partner with other agencies to publicize the restaurants that offer healthier items, we can really move this project forward."

The project is currently being replicated on a smaller scale in the city of Kalispell and on the Fort Peck Reservation. If successful, it will be expanded to other communities.

## Importance of Early Success

Modifying restaurant menus has helped to increase children's access to healthier food items in Gallatin County. The evaluation that followed revealed that most restaurant owners and managers were very happy with the new menus and had received some positive comments from parents. Overall, the eateries managers said the costs were low and the benefits were high.

## Lessons Learned

- Work one-on-one with restaurant managers to develop healthier menus.
- Suggest items that do not require managers to invest significant time or money in purchasing or preparing new items.
- Use schools and area chambers of commerce to spread the word about restaurants providing healthful choices for kids.

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## Resources:

Food Power Healthy Kids Menu Directory: <http://www.montanana.org/kidsmenus.html>



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*—Robin Mochi, Nutrition and Physical Activity Coordinator*

