

What's for lunch?

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It was a choice between fresh carrots or broccoli in the lunch line Friday at Sumner Elementary School. You could have both, or neither, but then you had to make sure to pick an apple, fresh pear or peach cup.

"Carrots or broccoli?" Sumner's head cook, Nona Bauer, asked the elementary students who came through the line. She's been serving up meals for kids at Sumner for the past 18 years and spent 22 years with Austin Public Schools.

The veggies got a lot of head shakes from kids, so they just moved on to grab some fruit. School lunches look a little different this year due to changes in federal regulations. Students must walk away from the lunch line with a fruit or vegetable on their tray.

So far, so good at Sumner for the new rules.

"We're pleasantly surprised," said Mary Weikum, director of food and nutrition for Austin Public Schools. Weikum and Bauer put together the menus. "The kids seem to be eating it. We're hoping kids will fill up on fruits and veggies."

Menu changes

The vegetables are still a tough sell for some of the kids, but they're getting better, Bauer said. Fresh strawberries are a big hit with Sumner kids, along with other fresh fruits including watermelon, grapes and kiwi. Bauer said she tries to have a wide variety of fruits.

One of the concerns with the changes of having more fruits and veggies, less grains and different portion sizes was the amount of waste, but there hasn't been a lot of waste at Sumner. Part of that might be due to Sumner students getting 30 minutes in the lunchroom now, so they have more time to consume everything on their trays, according to Bauer.

This year breaded chicken has been replaced with grilled chicken, which will be a hard transition, Weikum said. Also, with more fruits and veggies to fill up the trays, entree portions have decreased. For example, on chicken nugget day ("their ultimate favorite," Weikum said) kids will find one less nugget on their trays.

Items like pizza, nachos and nuggets are still available on the menu.

"So we're trying to keep their favorites," Weikum said. "We're all creatures of habit."

Student reaction

Sumner second-grader Olin Davis, who had an apple on his tray Friday, said he likes the carrots and watermelon options for lunch. His favorite main course? Chicken nuggets, of course. He was a little more upset about the reduction in the number of nuggets.

"It's not fair," Olin said.

Students will find french fries and mashed potatoes on their trays less often than in the past. Instead, they'll

see more sweet potato fries in the serving line, and when they do get the ever-popular fries or mashed spuds, it'll be smaller portions.

The work of food service staff is different when it comes to meal preparation, as well. Making sure each meal has between 550 and 650 calories is another rule that needs to be followed. It makes switching out one food item for another in a meal more difficult, and they just have to be "more conscious of detail," Bauer said.

"We're constantly keeping notes," Bauer said. "It's kind of a learning process for us as well as the kids."