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## Healthy Eating: In Fulton Schools, It's All About the Marketing

May 24, 2013 by [Ruth Taylor \(/blog/author/ruth-taylor\)](#)

### The Challenge

The school nutrition program at [Fulton County Schools \(/portal.fultonschools.org/Pages/default.aspx\)](#) in Atlanta, Ga., already goes above and beyond U.S. federal nutrition standards, serving 50 percent whole grains and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. The challenge was how to get to the next step: getting kids to actually select the healthy foods. After all, food isn't nutritious until it's eaten. The problem was not about changing menus or the food offered, as the menus and the food choices are already healthy. As area supervisor of Fulton County School Nutrition, my challenge was "How do we engage the students to want to eat healthy?" I believe it's about marketing the food.



### The Solution

Rather than re-create the wheel on the next step—getting kids to put healthy foods on their lunch trays—Fulton County is using existing community resources. Last spring I reached out to [Children's Health Care of Atlanta \(/http://www.choa.org/\)](#) (CHOA), one of the largest clinical providers of pediatric healthcare in the U.S., and found they wanted to help schools. I believe it's a novel partnership for a children's health care system to partner with a school system. CHOA offered training for our school nutrition managers through its [Strong4Life \(/http://www.strong4life.com/\)](#) program. The program empowers cafeteria workers to understand the problem of childhood obesity in Georgia and also to be a model healthy behaviors. Importantly for us, the program evaluates the environment that will make students want to eat healthy. We're learning how to entice students to make healthy food choices through simple strategies that can influence the cafeteria environment.

The partnership is a perfect aligning of missions. CHOA aims to move Georgia out of the top ten states with the highest rates of childhood obesity, and Fulton Count School Nutrition wants to serve children healthy and nutritious meals. Since schools are where most children spend the majority of their day and eat many of their meals, it is an ideal place to promote healthy eating habits.

One hundred school nutrition managers received background educational materials and learned about childhood obesity in Georgia. CHOA helped develop six different lesson plans, called Classroom Chats, that managers are using in classrooms to satisfy local policy that all school nutrition managers provide two classroom education presentations per year.

### The Result

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CHOA's Strong4Life school nutrition training, which affects the school cafeteria environment and nutrition staff and encourages students to make healthy choices, is showing great success already. We're experimenting with slight changes in presentation, prompting, and promotions in the cafeteria that can make a big difference in fruit and vegetable consumption, gathering data points to see what works and where the opportunities exist. I queried managers for success stories and got encouraging responses. One elementary school said, "I placed attractive fruit bowls on each serving line, which increased my fruit preparation from 275 to 325 servings daily, a 20 percent increase. Putting vegetables first on the serving line has vegetable servings up over 60 percent, from 150 to over 250 servings on some days."

Another school has had good luck with the servers taking the time to ask the child "to give it a try." Said one server, "A few weeks ago we served black-eyed peas, which was not a hit at all. On the next rotation, the servers really took time and promoted the peas and we went from 105 to 167 servings! Similarly, the first time we offered the Asian Chicken Bites we did not use the containers that comes with the product and only served 248. The second time they were on the menu we set up the fun serving containers and 300 students took the bites. And the third time, 350 students took the chicken! It is all about emphasizing the *visual* and *customer service*."

"The compliments are rolling in," says another nutrition manager. "The cafeteria has gotten many compliments from the principal, staff, and students since we started the program. They are saying our food looks better on the lines, and is more appealing. I am on the serving lines every day, encouraging them to eat more fruit and vegetables. I walk through the dining room, encouraging students to eat their lunch."

Fulton's school nutrition managers have embraced CHOA's "4 Healthy Habits" and promoted them to the students with posters and training for the workers. The habits are

1. Fill your plate half full with fruits and vegetables.
2. Be active 60 minutes a day.
3. Drink more water and less sugary drinks.
4. Limit screen time to one hour per day.

We're teaching our nutrition managers to pay attention to how we present the food, so students want to choose healthy food; talk to kids in the line, and prompt to make healthy choices; and promote healthy behaviors. The Classroom Chats are aligned with the Georgia Performance Health Education Standards, and help tie in the 4 Healthy Habits. This has been a great tool for managers to use, which we expect to offer to more schools in the coming year.

## The Lessons Learned

We found it is best to focus mostly on elementary schools. By building a foundation early with younger children, the students will carry healthy eating and choices into the upper grades. We are in the midst of following up with a cohort group of 20 elementary schools to give extra support. If we take away all the food choices, and only have healthy choices, kids won't participate; they'll just bring lunch from home. We must make eating fun, and set the stage so they want to participate in the school meal program.



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