

Louisiana Tech professor partners with local schools to study menu nutrition

October 6 2010

Dr. Mary Murimi, professor of nutrition and dietetics at Louisiana Tech University, has partnered with Lincoln Parish Schools (Louisiana) to improve the nutritional value of food offered to students throughout the parish school system.

Funded through a year-long planning grant from the USDA, the objectives of this pilot study will be to modify the current school menus used in Lincoln Parish to meet established standards and to assess the acceptability of the modified menu by students.

The study will also use the principles of behavior economics to determine the most effective strategy among junior and senior high students in making the right food choices in the school cafeteria.

"A major part of my research in the community is to investigate the effect of the school environment on [childhood obesity](#) as school children spend a major part of their daytime in schools," said Murimi. "The purpose of this grant is to modify the school menu so that the food offered to the students will be conducive to learning and proper growth."

According to Murimi, the grant will provide an opportunity to test the acceptability of the menu items by students and the effect of posting the nutritional values of the menus, conduct cooking workshops with the cooks to teach healthy principles, and to work with teachers so they can encourage students to make healthy choices.

To accomplish these goals, a three-week pilot study will be conducted to assess the acceptability of the modified menus by students from grades 7 to 11 who are attending summer school.

In addition to the modified menus, behavior economics strategies such as the use of portion plates, classroom-based pre-selection of foods and menu labeling and color coding will be applied to facilitate the selection of nutritional foods.

"Lincoln Parish Schools is excited about the proposed project and has already started making some changes," said Doris Mozart, director of food service for Lincoln Parish Schools. "Baked desserts have been replaced with canned or fresh fruit, students are getting a green salad with their lunch plate, and higher fat items have been replaced with lower fat options."

"We want students to realize that food can taste good without being heavily loaded with grease and salt."

Murimi said the expected outcome of this project is to develop healthy student-approved menus and identify the behavior economic strategies most successful in helping students throughout Lincoln Parish make the best and healthiest [food choices](#) in their school cafeterias. The most successful menus and appropriate strategies will be recommended for implementation in all Lincoln Parish Schools.

Provided by Louisiana Tech University

Citation: Louisiana Tech professor partners with local schools to study menu nutrition (2010, October 6) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-10-louisiana-tech-professor-partners-local.html>

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