

Quick school cafeteria lines could lead to healthier food choices

January 12 2011

Middle schools soon might add fast cafeteria lines to their menu of tools to help students eat healthier, according to Penn State researchers.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently awarded \$40,000 from the Economic Research Service to Amit Sharma, assistant professor; Martha Conklin, associate professor, hospitality management; and Lisa Bailey-Davis, senior instructor of public health sciences, College of Medicine.

The project will use economic concepts to study the effect of fast cafeteria lines on healthy lunch choices for middle school students, Sharma said.

"Students have only a little over 30 minutes to eat lunch, and that includes time spent in the lunch line," Sharma said. "Our idea is to create a conducive environment where it is more convenient for students to make healthier [food](#) choices."

Sharma said convenience is the key. When students are pressed for time and face multiple food choices, they usually pick foods that are familiar and popular.

"Those choices, as you can imagine, usually aren't the most healthy ones," Sharma said.

To limit the time spent in line, the researchers worked on designing a fast service lane option for school cafeterias with limited food choices,

called "meal deals." Students can select a main dish from limited options, for instance, but most of the side selections would be predetermined. Sharma expects that the strategy will reduce the time that students spend in the lunch lane and encourage them to choose fast lanes more often. The researchers will test the fast service lane at a local middle school.

The researchers will first collect information from students, parents, administrators and food service personnel about how students currently make food choices and which choices are the most popular. From that data, they will develop the food combinations for the fast service lane.

"We have to strike the right balance when we create the meal deals," said Sharma. "The food choices should be exciting enough for the students, but also healthy."

Once the food combinations are selected and the fast service lane is in place, the researchers will collect data on fast lane use and food combination sales for two or three weeks. The sales of the meal deals will continue for a week after the experiment to determine if students continue to make healthy [food choices](#).

"If we can counter those unhealthy choices, we can slowly have the students choose healthier foods rather than food that might be unhealthy," Sharma said.

Middle school students make ideal candidates for the experiment because previous research suggests they are beginning to develop the cognitive capacity to make choices, such as decisions on food and health, according to Sharma. [Students](#) also face more health and diet options at this age.

Sharma said it is important that the fast service lane concept fits the

school district budget, as well.

"Obviously, for the program to work, it has to be affordable," said Sharma. "If the fast lane meals incur significant costs for the food service, we will have to go back to the drawing board and find the solutions that are more financially viable."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Quick school cafeteria lines could lead to healthier food choices (2011, January 12) retrieved 2 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-01-quick-school-cafeteria-lines-healthier.html>

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