

Sun, The (Lowell, MA)

May 21, 2010



Mouths water at menu makeover

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LOWELL -- With his students literally chomping at the bit to eat school lunch each day, Hellenic American Academy Principal Doug Anderson knows not to dilly-dally "If I'm not quick enough, I'll miss my meal," says Anderson.

The private school on Broadway Street in Lowell has made some delicious changes with the hope of improving students' lunchtime experience, as well as their health.

It started last June when **Vivian Panagakis**, a parent volunteer, approached Anderson.

"I think you're going to kick me out of your office, but I'd like to take over the lunch program," she told him.

Anderson was thrilled and told Panagakis to bring him a proposal.

The new lunch program began in the fall and has turned out to be quite a success.

"Last year, we had the same thing every week," says fifth-grader Christopher Nacopoulos of Westford.

"Now the schedule's changing and it's much better."

According to fourth-grader Olivia Dristilaris, of Lowell, last year students could only purchase a lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Offerings were usually limited to traditional cafeteria fare, like pasta, burgers, hot dogs and pizza.

Students have adjusted well to the changes.

Fourth-grader Peter Manettas, of Billerica, admits "last year it wasn't really good" but that he now loves pizza Fridays. Nikolaos Gavrielides, of Lowell, a fourth-grader, thinks the best meal is the lemon chicken with potatoes and salad. Christopher Chronopoulos, of Lowell, another fourth-grader, enjoys the home-style macaroni and cheese.

Panagakis, a Tyngsboro resident, says she and her team of volunteers are doing their best "to make the best food choices for the money that we have."

Fresh fruit arrives daily from a local wholesaler. Whole wheat breads are baked in the school's kitchen, never shipped in. All meals are prepared from scratch. Chocolate milk is not served "and never will be," says Panagakis.

Three years ago, chef Jamie Oliver started a "Food Revolution" in Great Britain. Panagakis admits to having followed Oliver since the program's infancy. She was excited when news of Oliver finally hit the United States.

"I was thinking, 'I did it before it became important for everybody else,'" she says.

Celebrities like first lady Michelle Obama have started similar programs aimed at getting America fit and eating healthy foods.

Panagakis, who has two children of her own at the school, Katerina, a first-grader, and Sophia, a pre-schooler, was struck by Oliver's ideas and implemented them into her own "Food Revolution" at the school. (Her third child, Christos, 2 1/2, heads to preschool next year.)

"I hide vegetables everywhere," Panagakis says with a grin. "I puree beets into their food. I put cauliflower into the mashed potatoes. Everything that is breaded, we add flax to it."

"The faculty has seen a real need for this," especially the school nurse and physical-education teacher, says Anderson. "One thing about this community is that there is always food around."



Voula Danas, parent and PTA president, boasts that Panagakis has done a "phenomenal job" tackling the task of getting kids to eat balanced meals and incorporating traditional Greek foods into the menu.

Elayna Grillakis, of Lowell, a fifth-grader, loves Thursday because "every Thursday is Greek Thursday."

"We eat meals like chicken stew with orzo, and spinach or cheese pie," says fifth-grader Anna Vintzileos, of Lowell.

"Parents are glad their kids can come to school and get Greek food" because many parents work and don't have the time to prepare meals, says Panagakis.

Making school lunch, coordinating the menu, and ensuring kids are really eating has become a full-time job for

Panagakis. "I love it, though," she says. "They do more for me than I do for them. I get a lot out of it."