

## IN GOOD TASTE: Healthy food, exercise programs earn schools national honors

Alicia Abercrombie, Times-Press | Posted: Saturday, October 22, 2011 9:15 am

Third-graders Nicholas Rizzio and Maxwell Beale scarfed down their lunches at Westside Elementary School on Friday, tearing apart turkey ham slices and making orange smiles with their quartered oranges.

"My favorite lunch time food is pizza!" Rizzio declared. "No! Pizza poppers with toast!"

"Mine is carrot sticks!" Beale said.

"Ooh, and cucumbers," Rizzio added. "Those are really good, too."

Many might be surprised that the boys like carrots and cucumbers as much as pizza. But for Debra Wollin, food services director for the Reedsburg School District, their love of vegetables is a testament to her efforts over the last two years.

She has worked to bring more fresh fruits and vegetables, healthy meats and whole-wheat grains to cafeterias across the district.

That effort, in addition to helping kids eat their vegetables, led to four schools in the district winning Gold Awards in the Healthier U.S. School Challenge - Loganville, Ironton-LaValle, Westside and South elementary schools. Only five districts total in the state have been honored, and only one other school in the state won a Gold Award (West Salem Elementary School in the West Salem School District won Gold Award of Distinction).

The program, designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in conjunction with Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign, gives awards to schools supporting healthy nutrition and physical activity.

"The award means that we've gone above and beyond the requirements in the National School Lunch program," Wollin said. "It's a really great honor and it has extremely detailed requirements."

"We have to serve dark green or orange vegetables every week, provide fresh fruits and vegetables with every meal and provide at least 90 minutes of structured physical education every week at every school," she said.

In addition to the prestige of winning, each school received \$1,500 in prize money, a plaque from the USDA, a banner to display in the school, recognition from state Superintendent of Schools Tony Evers and a personalized letter of congratulations from the White House and Michelle Obama.

Each school gets to choose how to spend its prize money. The Reedsburg district plans to use its awards to improve nutrition and exercise programs.

Westside bought a new mini-salad bar so that kids can pick out their own servings of fruits and vegetables, Principal Paul Bierman said. Loganville and South will get new playground equipment and games.

"We're getting tetherballs and playground equipment and some Twister games for indoor recess, and new soccer balls and jump ropes," Principal Jenni Gehri said. "The money comes sometime next month. We'll get the new equipment and make a big deal about it and let the students know this is how they got it."

Gehri said the children at her schools barely noticed all the healthy changes to the school menu, and Wollin said that's how it should be.

"Pretty much everything has been very well-received by the kids," Wollin said. "The kids love their baby carrots and cucumbers and broccoli. We've phased other stuff in slowly and they barely noticed."

She gave the example of the pizza Rizzio loves - it has a whole-wheat crust and low-fat mozzarella cheese.

"They didn't even notice when we switched the crusts," Wollin said. "They could eat the pizza every day and they'd still get their two grains, two proteins and cup of veggies from it."

The requirements for the Gold Award are rigorous. In addition to serving dark green and orange vegetables, and serving fruit or vegetables with every meal, each school must serve legumes at least once a week and provide whole-grain products and low-fat or fat-free milk every day.

Food can't be used as a reward - no more pizza parties for good behavior - and the school has to provide structured nutrition education for all students.

Wollin said she heard about the program at a conference two years ago and has been working to implement the changes needed to earn a Gold Award ever since.

"It was a tough thing," Wollin said. "We had to get our supplier to get the products so we could even order them. You can't just say, 'We want 2,000 whole wheat pizza crusts' out of nowhere. So that took some time."

The district is contracting with local farms as part of the Farm-to-School program for some of its fresh vegetables. Because the district's current food contractor, Aviands, supplies the rest of the fruits and vegetables, the menu changes haven't cost the district any extra money, Wollin said.

Pineview Elementary School submitted its application for the Gold Award last week, and Wollin said she hopes the middle and high schools also can earn the award over the next few years.

But ultimately, the most important reward for Wollin is watching students learn about healthy exercise and eating habits that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

"If it's cool to eat healthy and eat your veggies, and you're rewarded for that, it carries over to your home life, too. We've seen that kids will eat it if it's put in front of them, and once you have them eating and exercising and thinking it's cool, you have them for life."

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