

Site dishes up nutrition facts

Frisco: Online program offers a taste of what kids can eat at school

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By KAREN AYRES / The Dallas Morning News

FRISCO – The school cafeteria line has moved into cyberspace.

The Frisco school district unveiled an online virtual cafeteria this week that allows parents and students to check out the nutrition facts and price of everything from salad dressing to hamburgers.

Several other North Texas districts, including Dallas, have looked into similar interactive programs.

With childhood obesity a top concern, school nutrition officials said they want to help parents teach their children to make healthy choices – like ditching the mozzarella sticks for the carrot sticks.

"I hope it educates parents and students," said Lena Wilson, Frisco ISD director of child nutrition. "Hopefully, parents will be able to sit with their kids and help them make the choices."

Frisco is one of the first school districts in the country to use the new Nutri-Café system produced by Georgia-based Nutri-Link Technologies Inc.

The program allows parents and students to select entrees and a la carte items offered on a specific day to see the calories, fat and vitamin content of each one. The items can then be placed on a virtual tray to see how the meal stacks up against federal nutrition standards.

For example, a bacon cheeseburger offered at high schools in Frisco has 435 calories and 26 grams of fat, according to the system. A cheesesteak sandwich, on the other hand, amounts to 250 calories and 15 grams of fat.

The system doesn't stop students from ordering what they want in the cafeteria line, but company and school officials are optimistic that it will help parents teach their children about the benefits of healthy foods.

"If you haven't taught them what healthy items are, they're probably not going to choose them," said Shannon Dickerson, a vice president at Nutri-Link.

School officials across North Texas said parents often ask about nutrition information, especially if their children have food allergies, are diabetic or have weight problems.

The Carrollton-Farmers Branch district unveiled a similar online system last year and now gets an average of 200 hits a day during the school year.

"It's really met a need for parents who try to guide and steer their children to healthy choices," said Rachelle Fowler, the district's student nutrition director. Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD spent roughly \$95,000 to set up the system and spends \$1,800 a month to maintain it, Ms. Fowler said.

The Nutri-Café program, which was just released in February, cost Frisco ISD slightly less than \$20,000. It will cost a few thousand dollars every year to maintain it.

Officials in other area districts, including Allen and Arlington, said they've considered interactive programs but haven't pursued them because of the price tag.

DISD officials are looking for a company to run an online system. Like many other districts, DISD posts nutrition information online, but district nutrition officials believe an interactive tool could be more effective.

"This just makes it more user-friendly," said Dora Rivas, division manager for food and child nutrition services at DISD. "It makes them kind of walk through the cafeteria line."

Since many children eat lunch and breakfast at school, Ms. Rivas said, she's optimistic that the system can help children lose weight and lead healthier lives.

"It can play a significant role," she said.

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