

## New site allows parents to monitor school lunch menus

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LAWRENCEVILLE — As obesity rates continue to rise among American children, many parents have started to wonder how to decrease their kids' waistlines and help them adjust to a healthier lifestyle.

Now a local software company is making it easier for parents to monitor their kids' eating habits, even at school. This month, Gwinnett County Public Schools unveiled a Web portal that will allow parents to view the nutritional information of their school lunches.

The school system is one of the first in the United States to pilot Nutri-Cafe, created by Dacula-based Nutri-Link Technologies Inc. The interactive virtual cafeteria portal aims to improve kids' nutritional choices by keeping parents informed about them.

"We feel that it's a fun, entertaining way that both the parents and the children will benefit from having that positive interaction about selecting the meal components," said Lora Novak, interim School Nutrition director for the school system.

Through the Web site, parents are able to print out the menu choices of schools, create meals and print their kids' breakfast and lunch plans. By communicating with their kids about their choices, school officials hope parents will help them make better decisions about what they eat.

There is no way to guarantee kids will make the same healthy decisions in the lunch line as they do on their home computers, but school officials hope it will make families think and talk more about balanced meals.

"Obesity in kids is now epidemic in the United States with the number of children who are overweight more than doubling in the last three decades," said Michael Lobato, president of Nutri-Link Technologies. "Obesity is easier to prevent than to treat, and the most useful tool in prevention is through parent education."

The portal helps address some of the requirements of the federal Child Nutrition Act, which requires each school system to adopt a wellness policy. The Gwinnett school system is one of the first to address this federal mandate using the Internet.



First-grader Melany Lua-Rodriguez takes a bite of corn on the cob at Sycamore Elementary School on Monday afternoon.

The system allows kids and parents to drag food items into a tray icon. They can choose the meal based on the information on the entrees and side items that typically appear in the school's cafeteria.

When users drag the food items into the online tray, they can view the nutritional value and cost of the meal. There is also a visual indicator to let parents know when they have selected a meal that is balanced and nutritionally complete, including a variety of different food groups.

"We're hopeful that this illustrates that you can't have a sandwich without a salad, or a vegetable or fruit, and really have what we would call a complete meal that would supply all the nutrients you would need for that day," Novak said.

To access NutriCafe online, visit the school system's nutrition Web site at [www.gcsnp.org](http://www.gcsnp.org).