

Mealtime Sampler

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New Look of School Milk Booms in the Southeast

School cafeteria manager Tammy Bean watches children eat every day, but she hasn't always liked what she's seen.

Sport drinks, and other less nutritional beverages have gone hand-in-hand with their school lunches, leaving her to wonder what it would take to get students to drink something with a more nutritious punch.

Today, Bean, who works at South Forsyth High School in Forsyth County, Ga., knows the answer. It's milk.

But it's not the same milk wearing an old, boring cardboard box. It's the New Look of School Milk, packaged in a plastic bottle, kept cold and tasty. "I have a 16-year-old daughter who never used to drink milk," Bean said. "Since we've gone to the new milk container, she is drinking five to six of them a day. She told me that she never thought milk tasted so good."

Bean's daughter, Emilee, is as active as teenagers get. She is a "5-foot-8-inch, 128-pound beanpole" who runs, plays sports and works a part-time job. "I used to worry she didn't get all the nutrients she needed. She runs everything off," Bean said. "But now she drinks plenty of milk. She has even gotten to the point that when she stops at the store to buy something to drink, she will buy milk."

Forsyth County tossed out those old cardboard containers in August. It's now serving the New Look of School Milk to 24,000 students in 23 schools. Bean said sales of chocolate milk have increased from 100 per day to 250-300 per day.

"Kids say it's colder, and it tastes better," she said. Schools like South Forsyth have catapulted the SUDIA region to lead the nation in schools converting to the New Look of School Milk.

"We're starting to see some exciting progress," said Molly Szymanski, SUDIA's director of school marketing. "Processors and foodservice managers in our region are really starting to make things happen."

Szymanski and SUDIA staff visit schools several times to sell them on the idea of improving their milk merchandising. SUDIA provides each school a \$1,000 grant to buy attractive equipment, such as glass-front merchandisers, to keep milk cold.

Today, 803 schools in the region serve the New Look of School Milk. The number is more than triple what it was a year ago, when only 257 schools participated. The New Look of School Milk Program began three years ago.

The region's largest school district, Gwinnett County in Georgia, also converted its mainline to the New Look of School Milk in August. That change covered 102 schools with more than 123,000 students.

Nationally, more than 2 million students in 3,000 schools are enjoying the New Look of School Milk. This compares to the roughly 400 schools that offered milk in this new packaging during the 2003-2004 school year.

"It takes some time to get schools converted," Szymanski said. "First they have to make the decision to change over. Then they have to bid."

