Tony Geraci is determined to get healthy food to the kids in Baltimore’s public schools

By Corby Kummer

TONY GERACI, THE food-service director for Baltimore’s public schools, doesn’t look like a reformer. He’s no nutritionist or lunch lady. He’s a stocky, blunt guy who grew up in the projects of New Orleans—“I know what welfare cheese tastes like”—and faced weight problems and diabetes. He owned and operated six successful restaurants before working as a food broker for 14 years. He was a professional race-car driver. Yet Geraci, 52, is one of several go-ahead national leaders whose names always come up at conferences on childhood obesity and school nutrition when charismatic dreamers have been dismissed and everyone is in despair over how to get children, especially poor children, to eat better food.

It’s his business experience, Geraci told me when I recently met him, that helps him push through the kinds of changes he made, and made fast, as soon as he got to Baltimore last summer.

Vending machines? They were already out of all but the high schools, and he “got rid of the crap food” in the ones that were left. “You’re in charge of what’s in them,” he said, to my surprise, as so many of his colleagues had told me that schools are addicted to their share of the profits. All it takes, he said, is the backing of the school board and its “wellness policy,” which every district must now write to get federal meals funding. Geraci redirected the profits away from the principals and coaches who generally get them and toward food programs—something he highly recommends, even if it takes some wrestling.

In the Baltimore schools that, like most of the schools in this country, have nothing more than heat-and-serve kitchens, he stocked vending machines with box lunches that met the wellness policy’s nutritional requirements. Students who qualify for food assistance swipe a card, and others pay the rate set by the school board. This encourages more students to actually eat school food. It is the number of students who do—instead of buying, say, chips and soda from vending machines, or “à la carte” burgers and fries from cafeteria fast-food kiosks—that determines how much money the government will give schools for meals.

Local produce? His colleagues tell me they can never find enough, transport it, or beat the price of commodity food. They don’t look hard enough, Geraci told me. He found farmers who would sell him, and deliver, all the peaches they could grow—for less than he would pay for commodity peaches packed in syrup. Even commodity apples are more
expensive than small ones from local farms. (Small potatoes, too, Dorothy Brayley, of Kids First, in Rhode Island, told me—as long as they’re white, unlike “chic” red ones.)

Shortly after he arrived, Geraci found a long-disused city-owned orphanage on 33 acres, hired a farm manager, and turned it into an organic farm run by schoolchildren. The project keeps growing, and Geraci keeps finding money to run it—and to build central kitchens for the school system’s 80,000 students. “You have to hustle,” he says.

Other food directors aren’t taking no for an answer either, and are quietly making real progress. Jean Ronnei uses a central kitchen to make from-scratch meals for the 40,000 students in the St. Paul, Minnesota, school system, and removed à la carte junk food. Her program runs in the black, and her success was a large part of an analysis by economists at the University of Minnesota that came to a contrarian conclusion: “Healthier school meals are possible without higher government spending to fund nutrition education programs or increased reimbursement rates.” Labor costs may go up, but only initially—and food costs, as Geraci has proven with local food, go down.

What unites these local leaders is not grand ideology but hardheaded realism about maneuvering through chronically underfunded systems. Kelly Erwin, head of the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, told me how Donna Lombardi, a school nutrition director in Worcester, Massachusetts, a city hard hit by the recession, is getting sugary drinks out of her schools’ vending machines. Lombardi “hit roadblocks,” Erwin said. “She’s taking them down, one at a time.”

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