



Cafeteria Crusader

How one dad came to the rescue to help transform school lunch. By Jane Dornbusch

WHO HE IS When Vincent Connelly took time off to raise his three kids, he became concerned about the quality of food served at their elementary school in Brookline, Mass. "It wasn't wholesome," he says. "It was just heat-and-serve stuff: frozen chicken fingers, pizza." Connelly, a former marathoner who runs 13 miles before work every day, isn't one to stand idly by. Having worked for years in restaurant kitchens, he volunteered at the school, and soon those chicken fingers were homemade and meatballs were a mix of beef and tofu. The nearby town of Cambridge noticed his work and approached him about bringing healthier meals to its district.

WHAT HE DID While Connelly was working in Cambridge's elementary schools, Cambridge Rindge & Latin School renovated its kitchen facilities, making cooking from scratch possible for the first time. That's when Chef Vin, as he's universally known, overhauled every menu item. Everything from roasted vegetables to ethnic dishes like Ethiopian *doro wat* is made fresh daily. "It's all scratch, nothing processed," says the chef. He's quick to credit his staff—"so much of it is having people who know how to cook"—and the support of an engaged community. Careful management and purchasing strategies help keep costs under control.

WHY IT'S COOL Students are buying into the new offerings: lunch sales have nearly quadrupled since Chef Vin took over, helping those who need it most (more than 40% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch). But all the students are benefiting from the changes. "A huge number of [kids] who could go to the deli down the street for lunch choose to eat in the building," notes Mellissa Honeywood, R.D., the district's director of food and nutrition services. "That's a testament to Vinnie's finesse." Elo Deneus, 18, who graduated in June, appreciated the upgrades. "The food tastes good, and it's healthy for you. It's a win-win."