

‘Brain food’ helps middle-school boys stay sharp

By Renee Newberry

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When it comes to school meals offered at St. Ignatius Loyola Academy in Baltimore, grease is not the word.

Neither are artificial, preservatives or processed.

The all-boys, tuition-free middle school just north of Center Stage on Calvert Street this year adopted a nutritious meal program that goes beyond current federal guidelines and in favor of what St. Ignatius Loyola president John Ciccone calls “brain food.”

That food is prepared fresh daily from organic ingredients by Revolution Foods, which has its closest kitchen in Cheverly. Ciccone is hoping the company and its mission will catch on in more Baltimore schools.

Among the benefits of the new approach: students like it.

“It’s kind of like fast food, but it’s a healthy kind, because you get hot dogs and hamburgers, and we have pizza as well, but it’s all healthy,” said Steven Youngblood, an eighth-grader.

Steven said students are required to have a piece of fruit with each meal, which, for St. Ignatius’s extended-day program running from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, includes breakfast, lunch and a snack.

“I really like the apples and bananas,” said Nijuel Hill, another eighth-grader, who said his favorite meal so far is the barbecue chicken with corn.

He and Steven said breakfast has had a complete makeover and now offers all manner of healthful choices: cereals, oatmeal, yogurt, granola, omelets and Omega bars.

On a recent Thursday, students could choose from a lunch menu that included Southwest chicken salad, macaroni and cheese with steamed carrots, or a chicken wrap. The Southwest chicken salad included, among other ingredients, black beans, corn, red onions, orange peppers and lettuce, all fresh.

That day’s snack, offered in the afternoon, would be carrots with hummus, said

principal Teresa Scott.

"The difference is," Nijuel said, "I think, it tastes a lot better than our last food, because I think it has more flavor, and it's a lot better for us."

The eighth-grader said the new meal program is giving him enough energy to get through the longer school day. On the previous meal plan, he said, "I had a lot of crashes."

Nijuel explained at the end of the day, he used to "get really sleepy and wouldn't participate as much. But with this, I have the same amount of energy all the time consistently."

Ciccone pinpointed the issues of childhood obesity and early onset diabetes as the rationale behind starting the new nutrition program.

"You need to be eating healthy brain food if you're going to be in school learning and doing your best," the president said. "You have students who are different after they eat. They don't get as sluggish, because they're not eating food that's making them sluggish."

He said Revolution Foods began in California as the final graduate project of two moms earning their MBAs. "They wanted to change school lunches."

The project took off and now operates in several major cities, Ciccone said, including San Francisco, Denver, and Newark, N.J.

"We're the only school right now in Baltimore," he said, of those using the contractor, "and they're trying to get into the Baltimore market more."

Partnered with Whole Foods Market, Revolution Foods is able to buy organic foods on the market's contracts, Ciccone said, making its program affordable for schools. He toured its Cheverly kitchen before going with the company.

"It was very fascinating, because we could see all the fresh food," he said. "Nothing comes out of a can or a box or is processed already."

Seventh-grader Raymond Bailey is enjoying all that fresh food. Raymond just that morning had three of the cheese omelets being served. The seventh-grader now looks forward to lunch as well, as he feigned looking at his watch in anticipation: "Alright, two minutes 'til lunch ... one minute 'til lunch."