Placing fresh fruit in decorative baskets and nudging them closer to the cash register. Tucking cartons of chocolate milk behind non-flavored milk in display cases. Branding vegetables with silly names such as “Dennis the Lettuce.” Who would have thought that such small changes could influence what students choose to eat and drink in school cafeterias?

Eric Enciso, Director of Child Nutrition and Purchasing for Redondo Beach Unified School District, learned quickly that these small changes make a difference. “My staff has noticed that we need to prompt students to choose fruits and vegetables much less than we used to,” he said.

Eric first learned about these nutrition promotion strategies, part of the Smarter Lunchrooms movement, at a training in 2013. The trainer asked him to close his eyes and picture his favorite restaurant: what sights, sounds or smells came to mind? Participants were encouraged to make students’ cafeteria experience similar to that of their favorite restaurant. “People really relate to what’s going on in the eating environment. So now, we count smiles in our cafeteria,” he said.

In addition to improving the ways healthy foods were presented in the cafeteria, watching students’ behavior prompted the district to make another change. About three years ago, staff noticed that students were more likely to choose an unhealthy snack between breakfast and lunch, when their stomachs were starting to growl. Nutrition Services introduced a fully reimbursable grab-and-go meal to squash the snack attack. “Now we offer a nutrition break from 9:45 – 10:10 a.m.,” said Redondo Union High School Principal Jens Brandt. “Students might get a yogurt parfait that has mixed berries, yogurt, and granola.”

Incorporating these nutrition promotion strategies propelled Redondo Beach forward on their school wellness journey. Redondo Beach schools have been working with the Alliance’s Healthy Schools Program since 2011 and have earned an impressive 26 National Healthy Schools Awards thanks to their commitment to health and willingness to try things a different way.

Eric encourages other districts to think outside the box. “Essentially, what we want is for kids to have a positive experience with fruits and vegetables when they come through the lunch line,” said Eric. “I went out to the dollar store and bought squiggly eyes and we put them on fruits and vegetables in our elementary schools. Reach out to your art department and see if they can help you come up with some creative ideas!”