



# Food for thought

Staff photos by Laura Moon

**Above:** A large group attended a Cobb County Town Hall Meeting to raise awareness of children's nutrition issues at Sope Creek Elementary School. **Below:** Sope Creek Elementary School fourth-grader Cooper Driskell informs the audience of a petition he has started to obtain a salad bar for a healthy eating option at school.

## Meeting addresses concerns over children's nutrition at local schools

By Elizabeth Farnsworth  
MDJ Staff Writer

**EAST COBB** — French fries, pizza, hot dogs and high-sugar drinks. Sometimes, a walk down the hall to the school cafeteria is a trip to junk-food heaven.

Natalie Rogers can attest to that from personal experience. Her 6-year-old daughter, Avery, is a first-grader at Sope Creek Elementary School in East Cobb. When Avery started kindergarten almost two years ago, Rogers signed her up for school lunches, thinking it would be a good chance for her daughter to learn to blend in with other kids and follow the typical school pattern.

But Avery was weepy and strange. Her mom couldn't understand what the problem was — until one day, when she asked Avery what she ate for lunch.

"She said, 'I had strawberry milk and cake,'" Roger said.

The shocked mom visited the school cafeteria and saw her daughter's story rang true — kids were not making healthy choices. Instead, lunchtime consisted of snacks of Doritos and Gatorade.

"It all looked like fast food. Why does the school lunch look like this? You can't consistently count pizza sauce and ketchup as a vegetable," Rogers said.

Cynthia Downs, director of Food Nutrition Services for Cobb schools, said the district genuinely cares about children.

"We offer multiple choices that meet the (United States Department of Agriculture) standards. But because every child is different, the parent needs to be involved in helping them make selections that meet the needs of their specific child," Downs said.

Last week, Rogers and other families — from Sope Creek

and other schools — concerned about school nutrition gathered at Sope Creek to share their concerns and learn more about nutrition in Cobb schools.

Eighth-grader Tiffany Mills spoke to the crowd. The point of the evening, she said, was to advocate with Cobb for healthier foods and healthier school lunches.

"If kids are fed what looks like fast food — which usually it is — then as they grow up, they think that fast food is acceptable nutrition. It's not," the 14-year-old said later. She receives reduced lunch. Although the fruit drinks are free under the plan, she said, students have to pay for the water.

"Maybe we could have a bottle of water to drink, instead of just this sugary fruit punch drinks. I think that would really help," Tiffany said.

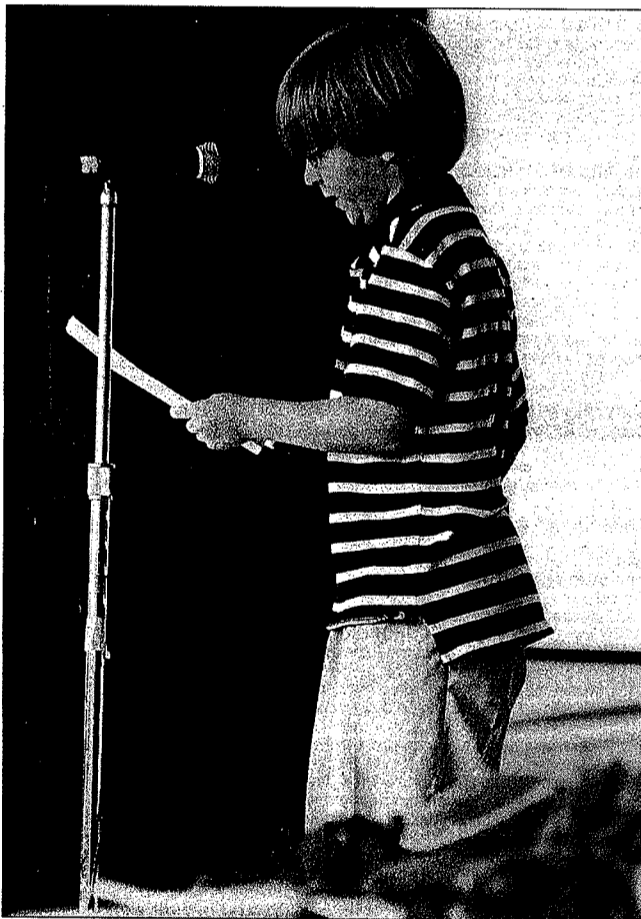
Now, Tiffany lives with her grandparents in Marietta. Her grandmother, Helen Mills, said the girl, who is trying to lose weight, would like some healthier options.

"She's trying to become healthier herself and is hoping other kids will join her. She would like to have options that most dieters would like to have," the older Mills said.

Although school lunches meet USDA standards, those standards are outdated, Rogers insists. She began to pursue the issue after sending "all 1,100 (Sope Creek) families" a survey on the quality of lunch standards at Sope Creek.

"We knew it was a hot button. In an educational environment, where you're expecting kids to go to class and sit down and learn, you shouldn't be feeding them foods that prohibit that," she said.

Now, Rogers and other parents would like to convince Cobb Food and Nutritional Services to pull certain items off the



menu. Downs said the district is changing the menu for the next school year. Among the items no longer available on the a la carte menu at elementary schools: Gatorade, lemonade, cinnamon rolls and Rice Krispy treats.

"There are children with different needs so we're offering choices for all those needs," Downs said.

After that trip to the school cafeteria, Rogers said she sends Avery to school with a hand-packed lunch each day. But

some people don't have that option.

"I have the time and the money to go out and purchase organic stuff and send it to school every day. I have friends who are single moms and they have three kids and they're struggling to make ends meet. It's terrible to me that just because a mom has to work full-time, she ends up feeling guilty because she knows they're not getting the best food."

efarnsworth@mdjonline.com