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'A la carte' School Lunches Under Fire

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Washington -- In the latest salvo in the war on childhood obesity, Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin took aim Tuesday at what nutrition experts identify as two chief culprits: school vending machines and cafeteria "a la carte" lines that regularly serve pizza and burgers.

"School vending machines and 'a la carte' counters are filled with products from companies that seem determined to super-size everything and everybody," Harkin, the senior Democrat on the Senate Agriculture Committee, said during a hearing on the \$6.4 billion National School Lunch Program administered by the Department of Agriculture.

"How in the world does a healthy, balanced meal stand a fair chance against billions of dollars worth of marketing?" Harkin asked, adding: "In the absence of any alternative, we should ban school vending machines and regulate a la carte sales."

The congressional hearings come after actions by three major California school districts to reduce junk food on campus. A year ago, the Oakland school board banned all sales of soda and candy in vending machines and in cafeterias.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest, followed suit in August with a less restrictive policy that prohibits the sale of carbonated drinks during school hours. And in January, the San Francisco Board of Education voted to eliminate the sale of sodas and unhealthy snacks throughout all of the district's 114 schools beginning this fall, despite the fact that the move could leave the food nutrition program \$500,000 in the red.

Tuesday's hearing was the first in a series in the Senate and House as Congress decides whether to renew the 57-year-old school lunch program, which expires this year.

With the nation focused on an epidemic of youthful obesity -- there are three times as many overweight adolescents as in 1980 -- school lunch has become a prime battlefield over kids' infatuation with high-fat and high-sugar foods and beverages.

Previous attempts in Congress to control soft drinks in schools have failed.

A la carte food sales of burgers, tacos and other treats are extremely popular with kids, particularly in junior high and high school. Under federal rules, these foods are sold outside the school lunch program and are ineligible for federal reimbursement.

But because kids pay retail rates for these items, a la carte programs pump cash into school districts struggling to find new revenue.

Under the law governing school lunches, the government reimburses schools for every lunch served that meets the program's nutritional guidelines. Barry Sackin, vice president of American School Food Service Association, which lobbies for greater funding for the school lunch program, said after the hearing that schools needed higher rates of federal reimbursement in order to abandon lunch programs' dependence on a la carte sales.

Federal reimbursement rates now range from \$2.14 for low-income students entitled by law to a free lunch to 20 cents for students who pay full price.

In its testimony, the American School Food Service Association asked for \$1 billion in extra school-lunch funding next year. But senators expressed skepticism.

"We're in record deficits now," Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., said. "And we see we'll be running deficits this whole decade."

Chronicle staff writer Kim Severson contributed to this report.