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Fast-food Profits Tempt Schools

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Faced with extra expenses in the school meals budget in the mid-1990s, Fayette County nutrition director Cheryl Calhoun turned to a solution that has worked for hundreds of other school systems: selling fatty foods in large portions a la carte.

Students ate it up.

The a la carte line at Fayette County High School serves 144 pounds of french fries every day. Over a month, that adds up to 5 pounds of fries for every student who goes through the line.

Sales of a la carte food like those fries accounted for about one-quarter of school nutrition program revenues in Fayette County last year. In other affluent school districts such as Cobb and Fulton, a la carte sales supplied about one-fifth of revenues.

"It wasn't something I relished doing, but we had to for our financial survival, plain and simple," Calhoun says.

Most schools nationwide with a la carte programs see the same result: Students who can afford to pay for their own lunches pass up meals designed to meet federal nutrition guidelines in favor of more expensive, fattier foods. Any student can buy the balanced meal, but students who receive federally subsidized free or reduced-price lunches can use the money only to buy the balanced meal.

School lunch programs are nonprofit and self-supporting. Besides food and labor costs, they often must take in enough money to cover utilities, janitorial services, replacement kitchen equipment and garbage pickup. School districts charge more for a la carte food than for lunches that qualify for federal reimbursement, which means more cash for cafeteria budgets.

Congress is holding hearings this spring and summer on the school lunch program. As it does, concern about childhood obesity and related chronic diseases such as diabetes is prompting scrutiny of junk food in schools. The General Accounting Office is expected to issue a report later this week that examines whether federal and state support has kept pace with school nutrition expenses. And, if not, how that contributes to the sale of profitable junk food in schools.

Mason Sanchez, eating deep-fried chicken tenders, a 6-ounce basket of fries and a 20-ounce Coke for lunch recently at Kell High in Cobb County, likes having access to foods he couldn't get in middle school.

"People want to eat here if they have choices," says Sanchez, a ninth-grader. "If they only had one choice every day, people would want to make their lunch, and the school wouldn't make any money."

At Kell, nearly 90 percent of students buy lunch every day, almost double the rate for high schools nationally. But only 18 percent buy the federally approved lunch. The rest, like Sanchez, buy a la carte.

Sometimes it's easy to tell what's a la carte: the packaged snack cakes and chips, sugary drinks, baskets of hot wings, third-pound hamburgers and subs with bacon. Sometimes it's difficult, because it can be the same food in the federally reimbursable school lunch.

A slice of pizza with a salad, a side of hash browns and milk is a federally approved meal. A slice of pizza -- or two -- by itself is not.

In general, food sold a la carte is either too high in fat, too lacking in nutrients or too costly to sell as part of a reimbursable lunch.

Fulton County schools sell a la carte food such as french fries, chicken tenders and low-fat yogurt, says Tricia Durham, executive director of nutrition. More expensive foods or larger portions can be offered without raising the price of the basic school meal.

"Part of the problem is schools have abdicated their role of *in loco parentis*," says Howell Wechsler, a health scientist in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health. "They don't think they have to treat kids as kids. They treat the school as a mall, and the kids can pick what they want."

Fayette tested its a la carte program in one high school. Students responded quickly, and the program expanded systemwide.

"I had students who said, 'This is what we've been waiting for. Now we have real fries. Now we have the portion sizes we want,'" Calhoun says.

A la carte food must adhere to some guidelines, because it's sold in cafeterias during meals. USDA regulations prohibit selling foods of minimal nutritional value, including sodas and sugary candies, during meals, but those regulations govern only cafeterias, serving areas and kitchens. Nothing stops students at some schools, such as Kell High, from buying sodas from vending machines located nearby and drinking the sodas during lunch.

If a food or beverage provides 5 percent or more of the recommended daily value of any of eight nutrients, it passes muster. At Kell High, a bakery counter sells strawberry shortcake, brownies, layer cakes, eclairs and even chocolate mousse with Gummi worms. Cynthia Downs, Cobb's school nutrition director, says that desserts like chocolate mousse provide protein from milk, making them a better choice than what's available in the vending machines across the cafeteria that operate even during lunch, a time when many school districts shut them down.

Downs reasons that it's better for students to buy desserts from the lunch program than a candy bar from the vending machine, but she acknowledges that she's still uncomfortable with the notion.

A la carte food items receive a lot of the scrutiny, but even the federally approved lunches struggle to keep fat levels low. These meals are supposed to provide certain nutrients and keep fat levels moderate and saturated fat below 10 percent. Nutritional analyses are based on a week's worth of meals, so some days the choices may be less healthy.

Schools are checked for compliance just once every four years. If they don't meet targets, sanctions are mild, if there are any.

"We don't want it to be punitive," says Susan Acker, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "We work with schools to improve the meals."

As a la carte food is introduced, sales of reimbursable meals typically drop.

When Fayette County High introduced fast food-like offerings on a la carte lines, 185 students quit buying federal lunches. Another 150 students who hadn't bought lunch at school before also joined the a la carte line. Those new customers, and higher profits on a la carte sales, helped pick up the cost of benefits for school nutrition employees, which had been shifted from taxpayer-derived funds to the nutrition program budget.

In a USDA-funded study of 2,300 school districts, more than 80 percent sold items a la carte in middle and high school. Sales were up for most schools, according to the 2002 survey. Beverages and snacks were the fastest-growing categories.

It's less common to find an array of a la carte choices in elementary schools. More limited choices may include extra milk, juice or a food from the USDA lunch menu. But some school systems also sell chips, sugary fruit-flavored snacks, ice cream or even

candy bars. In middle school, sports beverages, high-sugar fruit drinks and fried foods may join the roster. High schools are more likely to sell separate entrees and side items than schools serving younger children.

Some school districts have chosen to minimize a la carte items.

"We're funded to be a child nutrition program. Based on that, it's our responsibility to offer foods that encourage health," says Beth Mills, Gwinnett's director of school nutrition.

That doesn't mean Gwinnett students can't buy junk food at school -- school stores and vending machines sell soft drinks, candy, ice cream and chips, and club fund-raisers make fast food available occasionally. Students just can't buy it through the school nutrition department.

Calhoun has introduced fresh, cut fruit to the a la carte line, and plans to stop selling a juice drink that contains little fruit juice.

"I know I could make money off it, but mine is not a money-making business," Calhoun says. "Mine is to make sure I stay afloat and keep the program financially sound."

In Cobb, Downs is trying to change some things, too. A la carte sales dropped from 27 percent of revenues in 2001 to 21 percent in 2002, as more students chose reimbursable meals. She tinkered with portion sizes and trimmed high-fat ingredients to make some items previously sold a la carte meet nutritional guidelines, including pizza, sub sandwiches and calzones.

Students can buy a basic sub with fresh fruit and milk for \$1.85, or pay \$2.50 for an a la carte sub with bacon or grilled chicken, no sides or milk included.

Downs hopes the prices will encourage more to pick up a balanced meal.

"We're trying to undo some of the harm in selling a la carte," Downs says. "Our a la carte items are priced higher trying to discourage students, but it's hard to take away the french fries and chicken tenders once they're there."