
San Francisco, CA

Junk Food Out, Profits In At San Francisco Middle School

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Parents Advocating School Accountability

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At a time when lawsuits and controversy are shaking up the junk food industry, a San Francisco middle school cafeteria has replaced unhealthy menu items with wholesome choices -- and in the process has become one of the most profitable middle school cafeterias in the San Francisco Unified School District.

Aptos Middle School's "a la carte" cafe eliminated junk food and replaced it with a healthy menu beginning in January 2003.

During the last full month of food sales before the transformation - November 2002 - the school's food service lost nearly \$1,000. Within weeks after soda, chips, and entrees like mega-colossal burgers (58 percent fat), chicken wings (61 percent fat) and hot links (77 percent fat) were removed, revenues were up. By March, the program had become profitable, and it finished the year more than \$6,000 in the black.

After students were surveyed about favorite choices, the Aptos café added such popular items as sushi, deli sandwiches, baked chicken with rice, freshly made soup, salads and fruit desserts. All drinks with added sugar were eliminated, including those in vending machines, and replaced with water, 100 percent fruit juice and milk.

The fear that selling junk food is the only way to make money has deterred school food operations nationwide from getting rid of unhealthy food, despite widespread parent concerns about junk available to their kids. Children's health advocates, alarmed about soaring childhood obesity and related deadly health problems, are pitted against school activities directors raising money by selling soda and candy.

Yet not only has converting to healthy food increased Aptos' profits, but the profits also compare favorably with those at far larger schools. Aptos, with 860 students, generated more than \$2,000 in May, while the district's largest middle school,

A.P. Giannini -- with 50 percent more students, or 1,280 -- made less than \$90 for the month. Giannini still sells soda and junk food.

At Aptos, getting rid of junk food also significantly improved student behavior after lunch and reduced litter, teachers and administration report. And many parents who previously insisted on packing their kids' lunches are relieved of that task, feeling confident their children's lunch money will be spent on a healthy meal.

At Aptos, a committee of parents and faculty overhauled the menu by scrutinizing every item.

"We tried to make sure that every choice we offered contained nutrients, not just empty calories," explained Dana Woldow, chair of the Aptos PTSA Student Nutrition Committee, which worked with the school district's Student Nutrition Services (SNS) Department to develop the new food program. "For example, the student nutrition director tried to interest us in selling low-fat chips, but we told her 'no thanks.' What difference does it make if the chips have fewer calories if those calories are still empty?"

"It is not enough that our food be less bad for the kids," Woldow added. "We want the food to be good for them. Our turkey and roast beef sandwiches are made with lots of fresh lettuce and tomato. The homemade soups are loaded with vegetables. All the juices are 100 percent fruit juice, not 10 percent juice with added sweeteners. No matter what kids buy for lunch, they are getting something healthy."

Now the model that brought nutritional and financial success to Aptos is poised to spread districtwide. In May, a school district nutrition and physical activity committee recommended, among other things, that the Aptos model be rolled out to every middle and high school by fall 2003.

"We must move forward with the healthier choices at all schools," says Ed Wilkins, the SNS supervisor who worked with Aptos to develop the program. "It's the right thing to do, for the children."

The Aptos project has also shown that vendors will adapt to consumer demand for healthier products. Traditionally, food service directors buy what's available, even as they complain about high levels of fat and sugar. But Wilkins has taken a pro-active approach. When members of the Aptos Student Nutrition Committee were concerned about MSG in the sushi that was otherwise the best available buy, Wilkins explained the problem to the vendor. MSG was an ingredient in the vinegar used to season the rice. The vendor switched to an MSG-free vinegar, solving the problem, and Aptos now carries that line of sushi.

Wilkins also persuaded vendors to reduce the level of fat in some products to meet guidelines recommended by the district nutrition committee. As a result, kids will enjoy a new beef and cheese piroshki this fall, and chances are they will never miss the 8 percent of fat that was removed.

The changes to the Aptos menu originated with the vision of the school's new principal, Linal Ishibashi. In a January 2003 memo to the school's Nutrition Committee, Ishibashi wrote: "When I took over as principal at Aptos, my main concern, which sparked my vision for the school, was that of the disgusting menu options we were offering. As a parent of middle school children who have been taught plenty about good nutrition and who hardly ever watch TV (with its seductive advertisements), I knew that had they walked into the Aptos cafeteria and seen the Beanery offerings, they too would be more than tempted to forgo nutrition for the pleasure of JUNK.

"With the current national epidemic of childhood obesity and disease, my conscience would not allow me to look the other way. Our menu options made Aptos part of the problem -- not the solution."

Making Ishibashi's vision a reality turned out to be easier than anyone expected.

"Lots of people wanted to be involved, but none of us had the time to attend meetings," says Woldow. "So we relied heavily on e-mail, holding 'cyber-meetings'."

One topic that generated lively e-mail discussion was whether Slim Jim meat sticks should be kept or banished. A web search revealed that Slim Jims contain not only several forms of sugar but also something intriguingly called "mechanically separated chicken" - bits of tissue stripped from poultry bones and forced through a sieve.

During the committee's unanimous process of deciding to discard Slim Jims, one parent commented that the product "should not be served to doggies."