
Houston Chronicle, Houston, TX

State Becomes Sour on Sweets in School

August 5, 2003

Jeffrey Gilbert

<<<>>>

This document is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory website at
<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/CERU/Articles/CERU-0308-153-OWI.doc>

New rules designed to curb obesity and improve student health prohibit school districts from providing elementary children with soda, hard candy or gum during the school day, a state agency announced Tuesday.

The policy, which the Texas Department of Agriculture put into effect Friday, also bans middle school students from buying those items during breakfast and lunch. It also means parents can't bring sodas or lollipops to class parties and teachers can't give out hard candy or gum as treats.

"Children are required to be in school a certain number of days for a certain number of hours," said Susan Combs, Texas Department of Agriculture commissioner. "The school food environment is critically important to their well-being."

Those items banned are considered foods that do not meet the U.S. Department of Agriculture's standard of minimal nutritional value. Previous policy banned the sale of those foods in cafeterias during breakfast and lunch for all grade levels.

The policy is the first major initiative the department has implemented since it took over the Child Nutrition Program from the Texas Education Agency last month.

"I can't see any reason why a kindergartner or a third-grader needs a soft drink during the school day," Combs said. "But there are beverage companies scattered throughout elementary schools in this state, and that's no longer acceptable."

The new policy is a move in the right direction, said Mercedes Alejandro, president of Parents for Public Schools of Houston.

"We have so much obesity in our children, and everyone has to contribute toward fighting that problem," she said. "I believe many parents and families need to learn more nutritious options for their children."

In Houston, 19 percent of school-age children are seriously overweight. Another 37 percent, or 365,000, weigh at least 20 percent more than their ideal weights, according to a 2000 study in the Houston Independent School District.

Alejandro said the only problem with the policy is that it does not address problems in high schools.

"I would like to see restrictions at all schools because consumption of these products can lead to obesity at any age," she said.

Adriana Villarreal, a spokeswoman for the Houston Independent School District, said the policy is the latest in a line of local initiatives aimed to reduce the number of overweight children in this area, she said.

"We are trying to educate parents and students that they can make wise decisions with their eating habits," Villarreal said. "Kids' eating habits are formed when they are young."

HISD school cafeterias will also begin serving healthier versions of foods this year, such as pizza, tacos and spaghetti, she said. Physical education and health teachers are educating students on how to eat smart and stay healthy.

On Tuesday, about 300 HISD school food managers attended a training course on how to prepare the healthier meals, Villarreal said.

"We want to make fruits and vegetables more presentable," Villarreal said. "We might cut an orange in a really cool way and put a strawberry on top so it will look as good as if it were a tart."

Kirk Lewis, a spokesman for the Pasadena school district, said he understands the need for the regulations.

"We hear more and more about the health problems of our children in terms of obesity," he said. "The policy in that way makes some sense, but it is going to be a dramatic change with our parents and staff and the kids. It may be seen by some as a case of overkill when it comes to a Christmas party."

Lewis said one of the key issues with the policy would be informing the parents of the new provisions.

In the Clear Creek school district in Galveston, Catherine Horton, director of food services, said the policy would not affect the district because campuses already comply.

"We haven't had foods of minimum nutritional value for as long as I can recall. We don't do gum and all that," she said.

Representatives from Fort Bend and Alief also said the new policy should not affect their districts.

Combs said the department has other plans for addressing nutrition in public schools. Her office has begun an investigation of the relationships between school districts and vending machine companies. "In some cases, schools can make millions of dollars off of the vending machines," Combs said.

Many area districts have contracts with soft drink companies like Coca-Cola. David Sords, spokesman for Houston-area Coca-Cola, said the company understands Combs' concern about obesity and offers other types of drinks, like water, fruit juices and sports drinks, when meeting with districts.

Combs said districts in Los Angeles, New York and Wisconsin have banned junk food altogether.

"When you have the population we have as obese as it is ... we have to do something more," she said. "It is absolutely essential that we do everything within our power to help our children live healthy lives."