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Banishing Junk Food

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"Voice of the newspaper" editorial

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SAN FRANCISCO students will soon say goodbye to snack bar lunches consisting of nachos or colossal hamburgers washed down with Cokes in bucket- sized containers.

When school opens this week, San Francisco will begin implementing arguably the healthiest food regimen of any school district in the nation.

Oakland has already junked soda sales in its schools, as has Berkeley. Together, the districts are putting the Bay Area at the forefront of the battle against childhood obesity.

That's where the Bay Area should be. The healthier "California cuisine" pioneered here shouldn't only be the province of patrons of upscale restaurants. A school-based version is long overdue.

These districts have wisely decided that schools should be teaching kids healthy eating habits, not endangering their health by feeding them products of little or no nutritional value.

Eliminating calorie-laden foods from our schools won't solve the problem of childhood obesity. But it is a good place to start.

In the face of the district's own predictions that the new policies could cost the district as much as \$200,000, we commend Superintendent Arlene Ackerman and her staff for working to implement the healthy foods resolution passed by the school board last February. "We are moving ahead on all fronts," Lorna Ho, a special assistant to Ackerman, told us.

In snack bar lines known as beaneries, students will be able to buy fresh deli sandwiches, soups, salads and sushi. Food portions themselves will be downsized. All foods will have to exceed the federal government's "food of minimal nutritional value" standard.

These are all positive changes. We're disappointed the district is moving more cautiously to eliminate junk foods from vending machines located outside school cafeterias. Beginning next January, the machines will be emptied of sodas. And candy bars will be replaced with snacks such as Nutri-grain fruit bars, Rice Krispie treats and sunflower seeds.

Fundraising sales of old-time favorites like Hershey bars, See's candy, and Slim Jims will also be banned beginning next year.

Now that that the district has embarked on an ambitious path toward student health, we urge administrators -- and parents -- to take on the problem of vending machines and fund-raising sales immediately.

The pioneering food program is the result of pressure brought by a determined group of parents, and builds on a successful pilot project at Aptos Middle School. Aptos showed that kids won't starve when offered nutritious foods, and that schools can actually make more money doing so.

Some students will grouse about having to eat string cheese instead of Snickers bars. But we trust school officials, parents and students will work to overcome whatever obstacles may come up. Now it is up to other school districts to follow Oakland and San Francisco's lead.

What You Can Do

If you are a San Francisco parent or student, urge your school principal to implement the new guidelines immediately. Call the district at (415) 241-6565 to get a copy.

If you live outside San Francisco and want your local school to provide healthier foods, encourage school board members to adopt a policy similar to San Francisco's lead.