
Parents Advocating School Accountability, San Francisco, CA

San Francisco Schools Set New Healthy Food Standards

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Press Release

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With the beginning of the fall school semester, the San Francisco Unified School District is setting a bold new standard for healthy school food.

While many school districts around the nation are raising standards for food, San Francisco may be the first to adopt a "no empty calories" policy. The standard not only sets maximum levels for fat and sugar but also requires minimum levels of nutrients in all foods sold at every school, elementary through high school.

Baked chips, for example, have less fat than regular chips, but contain no more vitamins or minerals than their high-calorie cousins, and so are not sold in San Francisco schools. "It was not enough that the foods not be bad for kids," explains Dana Woldow, a parent of three teen-agers who helped write the new policy as a community member of a district committee. "We wanted all of the food to actually be good for them. 'No empty calories' is our motto." Other changes included reducing portion sizes and including more fresh vegetables with entrees.

The new policy is a response to soaring rates of childhood obesity and related disorders. Fifteen percent of children are seriously overweight, compared with 5 percent in 1970. Rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and other disorders in children have skyrocketed correspondingly. Some researchers say that the current generation of children may be the first in human history to live shorter lifespans than their parents' generation.

San Francisco joins a growing list of school districts that have stopped selling soda, including Los Angeles, New York and Oakland. In San Francisco schools, the only beverages sold are bottled water, milk and 100 percent fruit juice. No beverages containing sweeteners - natural or artificial - may be sold, which rules out sports drinks, most flavored and "vitamin" waters, and soft-drink companies' new line of milk blends.

Soda and junk food sold in vending machines are frequently available all day at schools. The new San Francisco policy – acknowledging that high school students especially may arrive on campus early and stay late for activities -- encourages high schools to keep their vending machines, but requires them to be stocked with kid-pleasing products meeting the new standards. Beverage machines carry only water, milk or 100 percent juice. Vended snacks include cold cereal, muffin bars, yogurt, tuna or chicken salad kits, bags of cashews or almonds, soy crisps, boxes of dried cherries, fruit and grain bars, beef jerky, pretzels, even old favorites like animal crackers, which meet the district's standards.

Students are still free to bring their choice of foods and drinks from home. "No one is playing food police," Woldow says. "Kids' choices are not restricted. But the schools will not profit from selling nutritionally empty foods."

There is another aspect to the new policy. In the complicated school-food field, the federally subsidized National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides the "lunch-line" menus at all schools, offering free or reduced-priced lunch to low-income students. Other students pay full (though reasonable) price for those meals. The lunch-line meals must conform to federal nutritional standards, though their quality varies widely. The more customers at full price, the more income, which supports higher-quality cuisine. Often, the lunch-line food is the same throughout a district at all grade levels, kindergarten through 12th.

"Competitive food" sales in snack bars, fast-food outlets and vending machines have sprung up at many schools, especially middle and high schools. Those sales are often run to fund other school needs. They drain money from the lunch-line operation, which then reduces the quality of those meals and drives more students to the competitive operations in a downward spiral.

When the NSLP lunches drop in quality because kids choose snack-bar foods instead, the big losers are elementary-school children. In most districts, elementary schools don't have snack bars, so the only option is the lunch line. Older kids' exodus to junk-food-stocked snack bars tends to leave younger children with lower-quality menus.

Meanwhile, to the dismay of nutritionists, parents and responsible school administrators, it's commonplace for students who buy lunch from the snack bar to make a meal of a soda and chips or a candy bar.

In San Francisco and other districts that are creating nutritional standards, one beneficial result of the new policy could be that more students will choose the lunch-line meals, allowing their quality to improve. Some San Francisco schools are already reporting such a trend.

In California, a state law eliminating soda sales at elementary and middle schools will take effect on Jan. 1. In San Francisco, the district policy means soda will not be sold at high schools either. A previous state law, SB19, attempted to improve the nutritional quality of school food. However, SB19 is contingent upon funding that has not materialized, so the law is effectively meaningless. The San Francisco standards are higher than the SB19 standards would have been, in any case.

San Francisco's Aptos Middle School pioneered the healthy-food policy in a pilot project beginning in January 2003, allowing it to be tested for slightly more than a semester.

At Aptos, a committee that included parents and school staff surveyed students about their food preferences and made sure that the new choices were kid-approved. The initial grumbling quieted down surprisingly quickly, as Aptos students learned to enjoy deli sandwiches, salads, freshly made soup, chow mein, pasta, sushi, and milk or 100 percent fruit juice, rather than washing down a bag of Cheetos with a 20-ounce Coke for lunch.

Immediately, teachers reported better student behavior after lunch and less litter on the yard. Aptos' test scores even rose. And to the surprise of skeptics, the Aptos food operation's profits soared. 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 the junk food was replaced with kid-friendly healthier options, revenues were up. By March, the program had become profitable, and it finished the year more than \$6,000 in the black.

"The Aptos project shows that it's not necessary to sell kids nutritionally empty junk to make a profit," says Woldow, an Aptos parent. "We're optimistic that a well-designed healthy food program can succeed throughout the district, and that it can be a model for schools nationwide."