
Parents Advocating School Accountability

California PTA Stands Up for Healthy Food

Caroline Grannan

May 12, 2004

<<<>>>

This document is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory website at
<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/CERU/Articles/CERU-0406-216-OWI.doc>

New resolution aimed at childhood obesity

A resolution addressing the childhood obesity crisis, sponsored by the San Francisco PTA and called "Healthy Lifestyles for All Children," was approved by a majority of the 2,718 voting delegates at the California State PTA's 105th annual convention earlier this month in Long Beach, Calif. Total attendance at the convention, held May 3-6, was more than 5,400.

The resolution calls for the California State PTA to encourage healthy foods and drinks at schools. Coincidentally, it passed the same week as the opening of the film "Super Size Me," in which filmmaker Morgan Spurlock documents the effects on his body of a monthlong all-McDonald's diet. Part of "Super Size Me" examines junk food sold in schools. In one scene, a school food-service supervisor justifies selling french fries and sugary drinks as a way to teach kids to choose wisely -- while the camera shows students scarfing junk food for lunch.

The California PTA resolution also directs the state and local PTAs to support any proposed legislation calling for healthy school foods; to advocate for daily P.E. in grades K-12; to promote nutrition education; and to encourage finding ways to fundraise without selling junk food.

A resolution is "an official PTA position that provides authority and direction for action by the California state PTA and its constituent organizations," according to PTA materials. The California state PTA, with just over 1 million members, is the largest state organization in the 6.5 million-member national PTA.

The PTA resolution, written by San Francisco PTA Executive Vice President Caroline Grannan, was put together during the period this school year when the San Francisco

Unified School District was phasing in a healthy food policy that may be the most comprehensive in the nation, with its "no empty calories" emphasis. The school district's Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee has also created a comprehensive list of non-food-based fundraising ideas, available at www.pasasf.org (scroll down to "issues").

"Healthy Lifestyles for All Children" was the most controversial and widely debated of the four resolutions presented and passed at the PTA convention, primarily because of the frequent perception that selling junk food is an effective way to fundraise. A proposed healthy-food resolution -- with several differences -- was voted down at the 2003 state PTA convention.

The other resolutions approved at this year's PTA convention addressed food allergies, adequate funding for school transportation, and youth involvement.

The PTA – or the Parent-Teacher Association – is a non-profit, volunteer advocacy organization supporting public school and children's issues. Its motto is "Every Child – One Voice." The PTA was co-founded in 1897 by San Franciscan Phoebe Apperson Hearst, mother of William Randolph Hearst.

For information on the PTA, go to www.sfpta.org, www.capta.org or www.pta.org. For more information on school food issues, go to www.pasasf.org.

##

The resolution:

Healthy Lifestyles for All Children

1 WHEREAS, The California State PTA since its founding has been committed to good nutrition as an essential ingredient in every child's health and readiness to learn; and

2 WHEREAS, An increasing body of research links children's and adolescents' health and nutrition to academic performance; and

3 WHEREAS, Sales of low-nutrition, high-fat and/or highly sweetened foods and beverages on K-12 school campuses have increased; and

4 WHEREAS, Childhood obesity has soared, and 26 percent of children statewide and 50 percent in some California school districts are overweight or obese; and

5 WHEREAS, Life-threatening obesity-related health conditions in children have sharply increased, including asthma, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and coronary artery disease, certain cancers, and gallbladder disease, and 70 to 80 percent of obese adolescents remain obese as adults; and

6 WHEREAS, Overweight and physical inactivity account for 300,000 premature preventable deaths per year in the United States, and cost California an estimated \$24.6 billion annually; and

7 WHEREAS, Childhood and adolescent obesity has become a public-health crisis so severe that it calls for changes in culture and policy, including working to ensure that food served and sold to children at school promotes good health and nutrition; now therefore be it

1 RESOLVED, That the California State PTA urge its units, councils and districts to encourage school districts and individual schools to improve the nutritional content and quality of foods and beverages provided or sold to students on campus, and to encourage the sale of nutritious foods and beverages during and before school hours;

2 RESOLVED, That the California State PTA support legislation, regulation, and other state and local actions that promote the sale of healthy and nutritious food and beverages on school campuses; and be it further

3 RESOLVED, That the California State PTA and its units, councils and districts support actions by state and local governments and local educational agencies that will provide for high-quality daily physical education programs for all children in kindergarten through grade 12; and be it further

4 RESOLVED, That the California State PTA encourage and support nutrition and health education for parents, students, teachers and community members that addresses the issue of overweight and obese children as well as healthy nutrition and regular exercise for all children; and be it further

5 RESOLVED, That the California State PTA encourage alternatives to selling low-nutrition, high-fat and /or highly sweetened foods and beverages when school organizations elect to fundraise.

Background Summary

"If doctors announced that nearly a fifth of our nation's children were exhibiting signs of, say, typhoid, there'd be panic on Main Street. But for the past 10 years, public-health officials have been warning of another problem every bit as life-threatening and even more difficult to treat: childhood obesity." That's how Newsweek magazine describes the health crisis that threatens to make the current generation of children the first in modern history to expect a shorter life span than their parents' generation.²

PTA has made children's health and nutrition a priority for decades. The California State PTA adopted positions in 1974 and 1991 calling for improved nutrition in school meals.³ But those statements did not anticipate the rise of snack-bar, "a la carte" and vending-machine food sales on school campuses.⁴ A daily diet high in empty calories is wreaking devastating consequences on children's health. The low-nutrition, high-fat, and/or highly

sweetened foods and beverages readily available in schools contribute significantly to the problem, as does lack of exercise.⁵

A recent study by WestEd adds to the body of research linking students' academic performance to their health and well-being, including nutrition and physical fitness.⁶ "Nutritious eating in conjunction with regular physical activity is fundamental to the academic success of children," stated a California School Boards Association report, "Linkages Between Student Health and Academic Achievement," in 2003. "Research shows that healthy, well-nourished children are more ready to learn and can take better advantage of educational opportunities. ... Numerous studies have linked poor nutrition with lasting effects on children's cognitive development and school performance."⁷

The consequences of obesity and poor nutrition cost society significant amounts of money, resulting in a net loss not only in children's health and well-being but also in dollars. Obesity costs the United States about \$117 billion annually¹⁰, \$24.6 billion of that in California.¹¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) urges increased emphasis on prevention. "The dramatic increase in the prevalence of childhood overweight and its resultant comorbidities are associated with significant health and financial burdens, warranting strong and comprehensive prevention efforts," the AAP notes in "Prevention of Pediatric Overweight and Obesity," an August 2003 policy statement. "...Prevention is one of the hallmarks of pediatric practice and includes such diverse activities as newborn screenings, immunizations, and promotion of car safety seats and bicycle helmets."¹² This year, the AAP applied that principle when it called for eliminating soda sales from schools.

Mounting evidence makes it clear that the public-health crisis is too great to combat with mere willpower. And what kids eat at school has a significant impact. "We contend that the school food environment and its influence on dietary behavior extend beyond the school lunchroom," write the authors of "The Association of the School Food Environment with Dietary Behaviors of Young Adolescents," a study published in the July 2003 American Journal of Public Health. "Students are exposed to food throughout the school day, and this repeated exposure, especially to less healthful foods and less healthful food choices, is likely to influence food selection outside the school as well."¹³