



March 2004

Policy Brief **1**

## Are Nutrient Standards for Competitive Foods Feasible?

**C**alifornia youth, like their peers across the country, continue to face a nutrition and physical activity crisis. Today's youth generally fail to meet the *2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* that recommend children two years and older eat a diet which is low in fat, sugar, and sodium, and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. *The 2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* also recommend that children two years and older be physically active at least one hour each day. However, a California study found that only two percent of teenagers met all five diet and activity recommendations. <sup>(1)</sup>

### Food on High School Campuses

Schools play a significant role in providing food to children and in shaping their acquisition of lifetime dietary habits. Healthy foods sold as part of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) can provide a forum for teaching healthy eating habits. However, California high school students have numerous school venues, such as vending machines and student stores, at which to purchase high-fat, high-sugar foods. The a la carte foods sold in these outlets are outside of the purview of the nutrition guidelines used by the NSLP, and therefore contribute little to students' diets apart from salt, fat, sugar, and excess calories. One national study found that the prevalence of a la carte foods (individual foods sold outside the NSLP) is on the rise. <sup>(2)</sup> In a 2003 study of California high schools, more than 70 percent of the responding districts reported selling pizza, chips, cookies, and soda as a la carte items. In comparison, there was only one healthy item (fruit) that was sold a la carte by over 70 percent of responding districts. <sup>(3)</sup>

### Current Nutrition Guidelines

California currently has limited regulations for the sale of a la carte foods. California Education Code 38085 states that fifty percent of all food items offered for sale during school hours shall be selected from a specified list of nutritious foods. However, this does not restrict calorie dense foods such as corn dogs, croissants, and fried burritos from being sold on campus. The Pupil Nutrition, Health, and Achievement Act of 2001 (Chapter 913, Statutes of 2001, Escutia) (SB 19) establishes nutritional standards for foods

sold at elementary schools, and increases school meal reimbursements, once funding is allocated in the state budget. However, the nutrition standards do not apply to middle and high schools where research shows unhealthy food sales are greatest.

The California Childhood Obesity Prevention Act (Chapter 415, Statutes of 2003, Ortiz) (SB 677) extended the nutrition standards established in 2001 to allow only the following beverages to be sold in elementary and junior high schools from one half hour before the start of the school day to one half hour after the end of the school day:

- fruit based drinks with more than 50 percent fruit juice and no added sweeteners
- drinking water
- milk

Additionally, electrolyte replacement beverages that contain no more than 42 grams of sweetener per 20 oz. serving are allowed in junior high schools.

### Can Schools Implement Nutrition Standards?

In a 2003 survey, California food service directors were asked how nutrient standards, if applied to high schools, would affect their current operations. It appears school

#### California Nutrient Standards for A La Carte Foods

SB 19, Escutia, 2001

- Not more than 35 percent of total calories from fat (excluding nuts and seeds)
- Not more than 10 percent of total calories from saturated fat
- Not more than 35 percent of total weight composed of sugar

(From EC 49431)

districts remain highly dependent on the sale of a la carte foods to support their operations and other school related activities. However, food service directors indicated they would be able to implement nutrient standards without significant capital improvements and/or increases to their budgets.<sup>(3)</sup> Fourteen percent of responding districts indicated that they had already begun to implement a la carte nutrient standards at their high schools. Only 28 percent of these reported decreased profit.<sup>(3)</sup>

Some school districts have taken steps to implement nutrition policies. In Vista Unified School District, vending sales and other food/beverage contracts were consolidated under Child Nutrition Services. Healthier options were provided and sales commissions nearly doubled. Capistrano Unified School District passed a resolution banning all soda in vending machines including middle and high schools during the entire school day. Additionally, all vended snacks in secondary schools, except chips, now meet the SB 19 standards. The school food service director reports that the students were very positive about the changes, and that water has become a very popular beverage. The Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest in the nation, passed two school board resolutions that banned junk food and sweetened drinks. One Los Angeles school, Monroe High School, pilot-tested the replacement of unhealthy foods, and found that although sales initially dropped, the sale of healthy foods is now on par with previous sales. Benicia Unified, Eureka City Schools, Folsom Cordova Unified, Kernville Unified, San Francisco Unified, and Berkeley Unified are also taking action to improve access to healthier foods and decrease the availability of less healthy options.

Student support for healthy changes is an important component of success. In 2002, the National Association of Student Councils surveyed over 1300 student leaders. Eighty-four percent of students felt schools should make healthy eating a priority for all students and 85 percent felt it was important or very important that more healthy items be available in the cafeteria.<sup>(4)</sup>

## Promising Policy Directions

The Surgeon General's 2001 Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity encourages changing the school environment.<sup>(5)</sup> Strengthening school nutrition policies is an important step to improving the health of California's children.

The following are recommended strategies for improving the quality of foods and beverages available at schools: *Eliminate the sale of foods and beverages that do not meet the nutrient standards outlined in SB 19, Escutia, 2001 and SB 677, Ortiz, 2003 at all California elementary, middle, and high schools.*

- Identify and promote healthy options that are popular with students. Work with students to identify these foods and beverages and to promote them to their peers.
- Provide technical assistance and resources to school districts which enable them to successfully implement research-based policies that promote student health.
- Create a system where school districts that have successfully implemented standards can mentor districts with less experience.
- Fund nutrition programs within the California Department of Education, Nutrition Services Division and the California Department of Health Services, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) to interpret the standards and to help districts implement them accurately.

## References

1. California Teen Eating Exercise and Nutrition Survey (CalTEENS). 2000; Public Health Institute; [www.phi.org](http://www.phi.org).
2. School Food Service and Nutrition Operations Study. 1999; American School Food Service Association.
3. California High School Fast Food Survey. 2003; Samuels & Associates and Public Health Institute; [www.phi.org](http://www.phi.org).
4. Action for Healthy Kids Student Poll. 2002; Media Management Service; [www.actionforhealthykids.org](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org).
5. The Surgeon General's call to action to prevent and decrease overweight and obesity. 2001; US Dept. of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General.

The Public Health Institute would like to thank California Project LEAN and the California School Boards Association for their assistance with this publication. The publication was funded by a grant from The California Endowment.



Public Health Institute  
555 12th Street, 10th Floor  
Oakland, CA 94607-4046  
Phone: 510.285.5500  
Fax: 510.285.5501  
Web: [www.phi.org](http://www.phi.org)