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**Big Man on Campus at S.F. Schools alters the way children eat –
and they like it**

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When student nutrition directors gather for conferences, Ed Wilkins is the oddball. He's a man in a field dominated by women, has roots in business rather than nutrition, has no children of his own and, at 6 feet, 5 inches, he towers above the others.

But that pales beside his resolve to ensure that San Francisco's public schools never sell students another empty calorie.

No more french fries. No more soda. No more Hostess cakes. No more Gatorade. No more ice cream. No more potato chips -- even of the baked variety. Nothing battered, nothing fried. No more "hot" anything -- hot dogs, hot links, hot wings.

"I remembered how I was able to eat as a child, and in all honesty, I was appalled at what we were serving them," said Wilkins, 56, in his slow Texas drawl.

A group of parents worked to make over the old menu, Superintendent Arlene Ackerman gave her support and the city's Board of Education approved it. But Wilkins, the district's interim director of student nutrition, has been the one to make it all happen.

Now, students can only buy food at school that contains less than 30 percent of calories from fat, less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat and less than 35 percent sugar by weight. In addition, snacks and side dishes must contain certain levels of vitamins, minerals, protein and fiber.

The standards don't affect the regular lunch line, which must meet guidelines already set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But they do affect every other kind of food sold at school -- from cafeteria snack bars to vending machines to fund-raisers during school hours. Yes, even the lunchtime bake sale is no more.

The new policy was launched at Aptos Middle School in January 2003 and has since gone districtwide.

Sales dipped at first, but have rebounded, Wilkins said, debunking the conventional wisdom that school food programs risk bankruptcy if they take away popular, fatty food. Now, kids buy salads, deli sandwiches, soup, fresh fruit, yogurt and 100 percent fruit juice -- and actually like them.

"It's made me change the way I eat," said Aptos student Racquel Kraft, 13. "I don't want to go home and eat a lot of junk food, because if I can't eat it at school, why should I eat it at home?"

Sylvia McClain, 12, said she has ditched chips for salad and lost five pounds. "I felt like a potato -- a couch potato," she said. "I was really lazy and didn't do anything. Now I'm more energetic."

That's Wilkins' goal -- to change the way students think about food and nutrition even outside the cafeteria.

"Maybe the kids will teach their own parents something," he said.

Wilkins isn't done yet -- he is launching a salad bar program at elementary schools. "Kids love it -- it's like a field trip, somehow," he said.

With so many children skipping breakfast for a few more minutes of sleep in the morning, Wilkins plans to start a grab-and-go breakfast program in which students grab a portable breakfast in the cafeteria and eat together in their classroom to begin their days.

Wilkins gets a special kick out of the kindergartners. During a recent lunch break, he folded his big frame into little chairs to sit with them.

"I keep telling them, 'If you eat good food, you'll get this tall too.' "