

Healthy food, healthy kids

A busy parent's guide to banishing junk food from your child's school - and getting kids to eat the good stuff

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Parents, Aptos Middle School, San Francisco

Sodas, Twinkies, Slim Jims and mega-pizzas are out. Sushi, homemade soup, deli sandwiches, 100 percent fruit juice, and baked chicken with rice are in. And all without rebellion from the students - and without financial downfall for our school district.

Aptos Middle School in San Francisco has successfully eliminated junk food from its "Beanery" snack bar and brought in healthier options, in a pilot project initiated in January 2003 by parents and the school administration.

The project's success surprised even its most enthusiastic supporters. The benefits? Healthier kids, of course. But also: Better student behavior, less litter, more nutritional savvy among our diverse students - and higher sales for the Beanery and vending machines, defying widely believed urban myth.

Aptos parents provide this guide for others who hope to improve the food at their children's schools. We assume that users are considering an experimental pilot project, similar to our school's, and will track revenues as part of the study. For schools that have simply decided to banish junk food for sake of kids' health, most of the information is equally relevant.

You need some committed volunteers, but they don't have to be nutrition professionals or doctors, and they don't need endless free time to devote. This project has no expenses. You don't need a budget, fundraising or grants to get it going.

A note: We addressed the food sold in the Beanery - a snack bar or café that sells items a la carte. We have not taken on the federally subsidized "lunch line" meals. Those are standardized districtwide and require a districtwide effort. While far from perfect, those meals do meet federal nutrition guidelines and don't let students choose exclusively junk items as the former Beanery menu did.

We also banished soda and all sweetened drinks from vending machines. The major soda manufacturers distribute 100% fruit juice and bottled water, so it was easy to request bottled water instead. Our vending machine sales rose when soda was replaced with water. (Our school has only drink vending machines - no food.)

Be aware: The U.S. Department of Agriculture already bans sales of soda during lunch in school cafeterias that provide federally subsidized meals. Many school districts openly violate that ban. If yours is one of them, that should be pointed out to district officials. Details are at the end of this guide.

A crucial piece of advice: Do not expend precious time and energy on excessive meetings, surveys, studies and exhaustive research. Use e-mail communication to the max - including "meeting" by e-mail - and focus on action.

Ten steps to healthier school food

1. Survey your community. Make sure there is solid support for replacing junk food with healthier choices. It is essential that the principal be supportive! Parents, teachers and administrators should all be onboard before you approach school district personnel. Students are likely to offer initial resistance. It's best to seek student input later, in choosing new healthy menu items to offer.

Tip: Parents, who are less vulnerable to political resistance than school administrators, can spearhead the proposal. If approaching one district department (the Student Nutrition Office, for example) doesn't succeed, take the proposal directly to the school board or the superintendent.

2. Form a committee of parents, administrators and teachers to plan and implement the new food program. It's vital that much of this be done by e-mail. Set up a group in your e-mail program so that you can hold discussions in cyberspace. Any parents working in healthcare or nutrition would be good candidates for this committee; science and PE teachers are usually knowledgeable about the connection between healthy bodies and good eating habits.

Tip: The project can include hands-on learning for students. Science teachers can emphasize nutrition education. Math students can track sales. Art classes can create posters to promote new menu items. It may be helpful to include ideas like these in your proposal.

3. Set goals and parameters. What does your group view as junk food, and how will you define a healthy food? Establish guidelines for calories, serving size, and acceptable amounts of fat, sodium, sugar and chemical additives. How far will your guidelines extend? Just to food served in the cafeteria? Vending machines? Fund raisers? School events? Some schools allow extracurricular clubs to raise money selling snacks; will you expect those clubs to abide by your guidelines? Should teachers and staff refrain from consuming soda or junk food in view of their students?

Tip: Portion size is viewed as an increasing U.S. health problem. Consider emphasizing reasonable limits on sizes - a cup of milk, a slice of pizza. This reduces obesity now and teaches healthy habits for a lifetime. Supersize portions can mean excess calories even with healthy items. A pint of orange juice, double the normal serving size, is 220 calories, for example.

4. Write up a proposal for a pilot program, detailing your plans and how long the pilot will run. The most likely objection to eliminating junk food is that sales revenue will drop ("We can't afford to!"). If you expect to collect data on sales, be sure to explain how. It might be easiest to request copies of weekly sales reports generated by cafeteria staff. These should include figures showing how much of each item was sold on each day, plus revenue totals. Write into your proposal a guarantee that the pilot operate for a set length of time (six months, say) regardless of the effect on sales. Although there may be an initial drop in revenues as students adjust to the new choices, the program needs to run long enough for students to make that adjustment. Schools that have committed to stick with healthier foods have found that these ultimately outsell the junk food.

Tip: Don't forget that students will purchase other items when they can't buy junk. Question claims that eliminating unhealthy items will eliminate the income from those sales. Income from healthier items is likely to offset the loss. At Aptos, parents who formerly discouraged their kids from patronizing the Beanery now readily provide lunch money.

5. Submit the proposal to your school district. Decide whether you want to first approach the Student Nutrition Office, the Superintendent's Office, or the Board of Education. The Board of Education is likely to be receptive, especially if you rally your community to attend a meeting and speak in favor of the proposal, but there can be some lag time between when your proposal is presented and when it is implemented. Going directly to Student Nutrition is the fastest route, but they are also the most likely to resist your request on the grounds that "we can't afford it." The Aptos community submitted our healthy foods proposal directly to the Superintendent, who immediately approved it.

Tip: Make sure district departments are communicating. After our project was approved, we had to remind the Superintendent's Office to direct the Student Nutrition Office to work with us.

6. Once your proposal is approved, survey the students about what healthy foods they would like offered. Ask for their suggestions - you may be surprised how many good ones they have. You will likely be working with the Student Nutrition Office, which may be able to arrange for tastings of new products. Most vendors welcome the opportunity to come into a school and hand out free samples to students. Keep track of student requests, and of their evaluation of products that are taste-tested. Finalize your list of new items to be offered for sale, and old ones to be discontinued.

Tip: Though eliminating junk is a firm decision made by the adults, emphasize to the students that their input is vital. Aptos students initially threatened to protest the loss of soda and chips, but rapidly became eager customers of the "new" Beanery, which carries many items they requested.

7. Implement the program. Start eliminating junk items and replacing them with healthier choices. Replacing everything at once will not go over well. A good place to start is with beverages. Sodas or other undesirable options can be replaced with water, milk and 100% fruit juice. Chips usually come from the same vendor as soda (Pepsi owns Frito-Lay, for example), so it makes sense to eliminate them at the same time. The next week, remove a few more items and introduce others. With entrees, be sure to introduce new ones before you eliminate the old ones. There may be some glitches in the beginning (maybe the sushi doesn't arrive on time, or the wrong kind of rolls are sent for the deli sandwiches), and you don't want shortages. It is essential that students know what choices are available. Use the student newsletter, daily announcements and school bulletin boards to publicize the new foods. There should also be a daily-updated menu easily visible in the cafeteria, listing the day's choices.

Tip: The easiest way to get kids and parents familiar with daily specials, if you have them, is to stick to the same special on the same day each week - Wednesday could be pasta day, for example.

8. Track your sales weekly. Are the kids drinking lots of juice? Maybe they would like additional flavors. Are some foods running out or going unsold? Make sure quantities are adjusted quickly, so that there is minimal waste. While frozen foods, such as pizza, can be kept until sold, most fresh foods such as sushi or deli sandwiches must be discarded at the end of the day if not sold, so ordering the correct amount is a lot trickier. One day the kids all want turkey sandwiches, the next they all want soup. There are bound to be days with much waste, and others when favorites run short. In comparing sales totals before and after the pilot program, make sure that other variables are controlled. The length of time the cafeteria is open, the amount of time the students have to purchase and eat their lunch, the number of serving lines all should remain the same before and after implementation. If any of these factors change, you won't be able to tell whether changes in sales revenue are due to the change in food, or due to the change in selling time.

Tip: If the data you are given does not reflect what you are observing yourself, look carefully for any inadvertent mistakes. When a comparison of our first month of revenue vs. expenses showed a completely different picture than what we had observed, we questioned the data and learned that it had all been incorrectly entered into the computer and the entire analysis was wrong. The correct figures showed a much rosier view.

9. Evaluate how your program is going each week. This means more than just looking at sales figures. Are more kids having a "real" lunch, rather than chips and a soda? Is there less litter in and around your school? Have teachers noted changes in behavior since junk foods were eliminated? Talk to parents; are they seeing changed eating habits at home? Although what you are doing is in the best interests of the students, cafeteria workers who have done things a certain way for a long time may be reluctant to change, or may view your pilot program as a criticism. Purchasing, preparing and selling healthier food is more labor-intensive than handing over bags of chips and cans of soda. Try to keep a positive tone to all interactions; avoid criticism and blame. Work together to resolve problems.

Tip: Build a good relationship with the cafeteria staff and manager, and with district administrators who are working with you. Publicly thanking and praising them is vital. At Aptos, the efforts of the area supervisor who oversees our Beanery have been vital. In one case, when parents wanted MSG-free sushi, he persuaded a supplier to remove MSG from the product. (School districts are good customers, so vendors are likely to try to please them.)

10. Let the world know how things are going at your school. If your program is a success, share your experience with others. E-mail us at pasasf.org and tell us about your program. We'll be happy to highlight it here on our website. Send e-mail to nestwife@wli.net.

Tip: If your program succeeds and you want to encourage other schools to follow suit, call your local newspaper and ask to speak to the education reporter, or send the reporter a note or an e-mail about it.

Menu changes at Aptos Middle School

Items eliminated:

Soda
All juice except 100% fruit juice
Gatorade
Iced tea
Flavored water (except no-sugar, flavored seltzer)
Chips
Hostess cakes
Nachos
Slim Jims
Taco pockets
Burritos
Mega-cheeseburgers
Giant round pizza
Hot links
Buffalo wings
French fries

New foods introduced:

100% fruit juice
Milk Chugs
Normal portion size burgers/grilled chicken or veggie patty sandwiches
Pizza slice with side salad
Deli sandwiches - turkey, roast beef, ham & cheese
Sushi
Soup
Fruit cups
Go-gurt
Daily hot special - chicken, spaghetti, etc.
Chef's salad

Old foods retained:

Bottled water
Chow mein
Fried rice
Bagels
String cheese
Pickles
Fresh baked cookie on only certain days
Yogurt

How we surveyed students about they wanted

At Aptos, we did not create a survey form. Teachers handled surveying their classes as they chose, generally by simply asking kids to list healthy foods they'd like to see on the menu. Naturally there was some silliness, with kids deliberately listing junk, and some less-informed students listed unhealthy foods due to poor understanding. That created "teachable moments" for nutrition education. A survey might include a list of suggested items.

We did not promise to provide every requested item, but made an effort to provide as many popular items as we could. (Smoothies were a much-requested item that we have not yet been able to accommodate, because we have not found a supplier that will meet our standard of the fruit/juice component made from 100% fruit rather than a large amount of added sweetening. We are still searching.)

Myths about soda and junk foods

For a version of this that includes links to articles and other information, go to <http://pasaorg.tripod.com/nutrition/myths.html> on the website www.pasasf.org.

Dire predictions frequently warn of disastrous consequences if schools banish unhealthy drinks and snacks -- but these warnings seem to be urban myths, in the same vein as razor blades in Halloween apples. These arguments are heard all across the country from interests that oppose the removal of junk food from schools. In fact, the arguments often come from the corporations that manufacture soda and snack foods.

Myth #1: If we ban soda, we will lose lots of money.

Schools which believe they rely on income from sales of unhealthy foods are understandably reluctant to risk eliminating junk food. Often, a school official will mention a laundry list of school programs funded by soda profits, claiming that eliminating soda would eliminate the programs. This argument completely overlooks the fact that thirsty students who cannot buy soda will buy healthier beverages - bottled water, 100% fruit juice or milk - if they are available at reasonable cost.

Myth #2: Soda is not the problem; kids need more exercise.

This is a favorite line of the National Soft Drink Association, a Washington-based trade group representing soda companies. Ironically, although kids do need more exercise, soda may put them at higher risk for activity-related injuries. Soda consumption has been clearly linked to more broken bones, obesity, and osteoporosis. A Harvard School of Public Health study found that physically active teenage girls who were soda-drinkers were three times more likely to suffer broken bones than their teammates who did not drink carbonated beverages. For cola-drinkers, the risk was five times greater. More exercise alone will not help these girls; in fact, for this group, increasing exercise without reducing soda consumption could result in more broken bones. Soda manufacturers like to say that banning soda is not the answer to the crisis in children's health. Yet it is a critically important part of the answer, along with better overall nutrition and more exercise.

Myth #3: The soft drink companies help our school by donating scoreboards, uniforms, and other equipment.

The soft drink companies help themselves by building brand loyalty among kids in the hope that it will last a lifetime. Adequate funding of the schools is the responsibility of the government; it is one of the reasons we pay taxes. Here's what a brave school board member in Colorado said:

"Yes, schools need money, but turning to commercial sales for income is a cop-out. It sends the message to our voters and legislators that we can let them off the hook--that advertising and sales of consumer products can fill the gap when it comes to supporting education."

An Oklahoma legislator has proposed a \$2 tax on the sale of soft drink syrup in Oklahoma, estimated to produce upwards of \$60 million per year. The revenue would go to the state's General Revenue Fund, where it would be appropriated by the Legislature for various state departments, including education. Arkansas already has such a tax, and it is being considered in several other states. The bill has met with widespread approval from nearly everyone, except the soft drink companies.

Myth #4: Kids won't buy healthy foods from vending machines.

Not true. Despite claims that students would never give up their favorite junk foods, research shows that the deciding factor for students, given a choice between healthy or unhealthy drinks and snacks, was price.

"A study last year showed there are ways to successfully prod school kids toward healthy choices -- through their wallets. The American Journal of Public Health published a study showing that in a high school vending machine stocked with both healthy and unhealthy choices, students will choose healthy items if they are priced slightly cheaper than the unhealthy choices. Sales volume rose enough that the machine generated the same amount of money as the machine stocked with only unhealthy choices. "North High School in Minneapolis is putting that to the test. "In September the school got rid of all but one of its eight pop machines -- replacing them with 10 water machines and two juice machines. In the remaining pop machine, a can of pop costs \$1.25 and water is 75 cents. Last fall, water outsold pop compared to the same period the previous year, said Bryan Bass, intern assistant principal."

Myth #5: Banning soda sales takes away kids' right to free choice.

This argument completely disregards the fact that students are free to choose among healthier alternatives, such as juice, water, milk, or seltzer. They are also free to bring their favorite soft drink from home.

Interestingly, the same folks who talk about the kids' "right to choose" see no problem with school districts signing exclusive "pouring rights" contracts. These agreements give one company (usually Coke or Pepsi) the exclusive right to sell their products on school property, with all competitors' products banned. As soon as the contract is signed with Pepsi, for example, talk about a student's "right to choose" Coke or 7-Up ceases. Districts desperate for money are willing to sign away this supposed "right to choose," and the winning soft drink company actively participates in limiting the kids' "choice" to one manufacturer's products. A frequent consequence of "pouring rights" contracts is that the price of soda at schools with exclusive contracts increases, as is often the case with any monopoly.

About Aptos Middle School

This demographic profile is intended to show what type of school is succeeding with a healthy food program. Figures are from the San Francisco Unified School District for the 2002-'03 school year.

Aptos, located in southwestern San Francisco, teaches 859 students in grades 6-8. Its attendance area encompasses neighborhoods ranging from housing projects to upper-middle-class.

Ethnic breakdown:

Hispanic/Latino 24.3%

Chinese 24.2%

African-American 21.2%

White 9.8%

Economically disadvantaged students (qualifying for free/reduced-price lunch): 35.9%

English-language learners: 14.4%

Information on the USDA's limits on sales of soda during lunch periods:

Sections 210.10 and 210.11 of the National School Lunch Program regulations and Sections 220.8 and 220.12 of

the School Breakfast Program regulations ban sales of Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value (FMNV) during lunch in cafeterias and eating areas of schools that provide federally reimbursable meals. Soda heads the USDA's list of FMNV. The other items are certain candies and sweets.

A Jan. 16, 2001, memo from Stanley C. Garnett, Director, USDA Child Nutrition Division summarizes the regulations. The following are excerpts from the memo: “[F]ood service areas must not provide access to FMNV during student meal periods,” it declares. “‘[F]ood service area’ refers to any area on school premises where program meals [federally reimbursable school breakfasts and lunches] are both served and eaten as well as any areas in which program meals are either served or eaten. ...

“‘Eating areas’ that are completely separate from the ‘serving lines’ are clearly part of the food service area. ... [S]chools may not design their food service area in such a way as to encourage or facilitate the choice or purchase of FMNV. ...

“State agencies and SFAs [school food authorities] may impose other restrictions on all foods sold at anytime throughout their schools.”

According to legal experts, USDA regulations constitute law.