

A Full Plate for Schools

Broccoli or burgers?

Getting kids to make healthful food choices is an uphill battle

BY JOHN MARLOWE

The jury is in: Junk food is out. At least 12 states, as of summer 2001, are deep-sixing junk foods in schools. In October, for example, California Gov. Gray Davis signed into a law a bill proposed by State Sen. Martha Escutia that declares, "At elementary schools, the only food that may be sold to pupils during breakfast and lunch periods is food that is sold as a full meal."

Proposals like this are spreading across the nation, and the movement will surely grow. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, approximately one in five U.S. children is overweight—and the number of overweight children has doubled in the past two decades. Alarmed legislators are getting on

the healthy-food bandwagon (at least those who are physically able to climb aboard), and that means more mandates for school districts. But lest the solution be more trouble than the problems it was created to solve, school boards need to take action to

- Strengthen physical education and nutrition curricula
- Seek new sources of funding for programs that have previously been supported by junk food sales and soft drink machines
- Reevaluate open-campus policies and related discipline problems
- Expand or implement special programs for students who have health and learning problems related to nutrition and diet.

Easier said than done, of course. Once again, schools are being asked to clean up someone else's mess. But someone has to do it—the arguments against serving fast food in school meals are overwhelming. Escutia's bill presents the statistics for California, and they speak for the nation: In a survey conducted in 2000, 95 percent of responding California school districts reported that they sell fast foods, the most common of which are sodas, pizza, cookies, chips, and burritos, contributing to the fact that carbonated drinks are the single biggest source of refined sugars in the American diet. Approximately 70 percent of children in the United States who are 2 to 11 years of age exceeded current dietary recommendations for intakes of total and saturated fat, and only 21 percent of California children meet the goal of eating five servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

As Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman wrote recently in *School Board News*, "many of our students are failing healthy eating." Consider the following:

- Only 2 percent of schoolchildren meet all the recommendations of the Food Guide Pyramid.
- Sixteen percent do not meet any of them.
- Fewer than 15 percent eat the recommended servings of fruit on any given day.
- Fewer than 25 percent eat the recommended servings of grains.
- Only 30 percent consume the recommended milk group servings.

They are what they eat

It's a given that bad diets makes unhealthy students who, additionally, might have learning difficulties. It makes sense that schools should become part of the solution instead of adding calories to the problem. But unexpected and uninvited guests—in the form of hidden costs, curriculum revision, and discipline and social problems—will show up at the party. Make sure your table is set.

Handling the issue isn't going to be easy, given the traditional rift between the district office, the school board, and the site staff. Many principals don't want to talk about it, but off the record, one principal sent me this e-mail message:

"As a principal, I am primarily responsible for hiring the right teachers, managing their performance, and carefully crafting a budget to leverage categorical and grant money to best augment instruction. My additional responsibility is to increase student attendance. Good food and fast lines make kids want to come to school. However, food service should not distract from my primary responsibility. It should be completely contracted so providers look at the kids and me as customers to please. In too many schools the food is bad, the lines move slowly, and principals are badmouthed for things they can't control. Exhausted, they stand and look at derisive students in

lunch lines and wonder when they will get some time for instruction."

Delores Flores, director of food services for Florida's Pinellas County Schools, doesn't care about derision. She is pleased that vending machines were shut down in her district, maintaining that students do not have the maturity to choose the right foods. But Renee Kling, the food service manager for Point Arena (Calif.) Unified School District, has a different view. "If you give kids a choice, they eventually come around to making solid decisions," she says, adding that students need support from home.

The fact is, mature or not, students are making the decisions—right or wrong, in school or out, and we have to educate them to make the right ones.

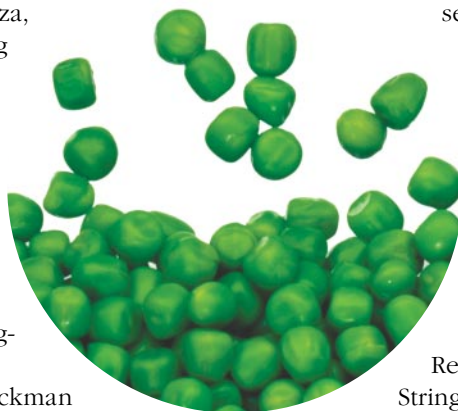
Let me give a tragic high-profile example. Remember Minnesota Vikings star Corey Stringer, who died of heat exhaustion at football practice? It might have been the heat that killed him, but his diet didn't help. Here's a sample meal at his mother's, as described by Jeanne Marie Laskas in the September 2001 *Esquire*: "Kevin ... comes in with a pizza. ... A cousin is here with chicken wings. Corey's little sister, Kim, comes in with French fries. Plus his mom had stopped and gotten two Caesar salads in those shaker mugs at McDonalds. ... In the morning he shows up at 8:30 after breakfast of grits with scrambled eggs and sugar all mixed together."

Many kids follow the examples Stringer and his fellow pro set. Take Dustin Elster and Steve Oropeza. They're good buddies who do everything together. They get up at the same time and start eating and don't quit until its time to go to bed. Dustin tells me he is a finely tuned athletic machine. A junior in high school, he weighs in at a svelte 250 and stands six feet, one inch tall. Dustin and Steve eat in the school cafeteria as little as possible, preferring to take advantage of the school's liberal open-campus policy. Instead of cafeteria fare, they eat a lunch meat sandwich, a bag of chips, and a soft drink at a grocery store around the corner.

They both play football, racking up considerable time in the weight room and plenty of laps around the field. They both plan to continue lifting weights into adulthood. When I asked them about nutrition education, they spoke for many students when they said they studied nutrition in their 10th-grade health class, but it didn't take. They admitted not being impressed enough to change their diet. Did their coaches talk to them about nutrition? Not that they remembered. It's possible these two have had a lot of nutrition education, both in and out of class, and it just hasn't sunk in yet. But my guess is they are typical of far too many kids who simply eat the way they want.

The commercials are winning

Schools face an uphill battle on nutrition education—more difficult than the fight against smoking. Heavy-duty television



commercials push against your shove for better nutrition. In fact, commercials promoting junk food seem as ubiquitous as commercials for miracle cures to combat the results of eating too much junk food. Some of the fast-food come-ons not only promote bad diets, they also wallow in bad manners. “Don’t bother me, I’m eating,” is an ad campaign from the fast-food chain Carl’s Jr. The ad features grungy young adults dripping their hamburger sauce on the street, suggesting to kids that it’s cool to be sloppy, selfish, and inconsiderate.

In a surprising number of schools, students actually call and order delivery from Pizza Hut. (You might need a policy for this one.) In other schools, school lunch is contracted out to pizza and burger chains. And no wonder: In its *Kids and School Meals Study 2001*, Sodexo reports that students’ favorite lunches are, in order of preference, pizza, sub sandwiches, hamburgers, chicken, chips/crackers, Mexican food, peanut butter and jelly, French fries, spaghetti, and hot dogs. Few healthy items lurk in this list, even though savvy food service chefs can find ways to reduce the calories, fats, and sugars in many of these foods.

Still, as Lakeland (Idaho) High School student Shannon Miller told the Associated Press, “There is healthy stuff in the

cafeteria, like salads and fruits. Not many people eat that, though.”

In addition to teaching about nutrition, then, schools need to do a better job of getting everyone involved in physical education classes. Childhood obesity can bring major health problems later in life, and lack of physical activity is an important part of the equation. Activity is essential for children, but physical education time is being cut in many schools. The National Association of State Boards of Education recommends supervised recess in elementary school, a sequential program of physical education courses, and plenty of opportunity for students, staff, and family members to take part in physical activities. (See *Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn: A School Health Policy Guide*, online at <http://www.nasbe.org/healthy-schools/fitthehealthy.html#phyed>.)

Trouble is, kids are spending too many inactive hours in front of television and computer screens. So while Dustin and Steve are getting exercise to counterbalance their iffy diets, far too many students are eating the same diet they do (or worse) without exercising enough to break a sweat.

Open campus, closed campus

Another major challenge is the open-campus lunch period, according to people on the front lines, like

Renee Kling’s chicken tostadas



Renee Kling, the food service manager for Point Arena (Calif.) Unified School District, runs the best high school food program I’ve seen. Here are her story and one of her favorite recipes:

I’ve been in the food business, it seems, all my life, starting from a family of good cooks. They trained us young. I have worked in restaurants since 1979, and in each of those jobs, I’ve had the lead cook position and been supervisor of kitchen staff. I have a two-year degree and went to secretarial school.

Working for the school district has been the most challenging job yet. Sure, I’ve always cooked, but kids are the hardest critics. Restaurant cooking is a breeze—people order what they like and how they like it. Let’s face it, kids are darn picky! Keeping up on the regulations and paperwork that the state requires can be a pain, especially the five-year audit. And have I mentioned the budget or keeping up the staff morale?

When I signed on, I thought I could plan, order, and execute menus with my eyes closed. I’m glad what little background I had in secretarial work and supervisor capacity was enough. Oh yeah, this is much more than I ever bargained for, but my motto is “Take this job and love it!”

Here is one of my favorite recipes. The kids enjoy it.

Chicken tostadas

- 10 lb. diced commodity chicken
- 1 no. 10 can commodity salsa
- 1 pack taco seasoning
- 2 cups water
- Combine ingredients in deep hotel pan and heat for 1½ hrs. at 350 degrees.
- 7 lb reduced-fat commodity cheddar cheese
- 5 heads of shredded lettuce
- 6 to 8 diced tomatoes
- 80 tostada shells (warmed)

To assemble tostada, place 2 oz. of cooked chicken on tostada shell and top with cheese, lettuce, and tomato.

John Morrison, assistant principal of Castro Valley (Calif.) High School. “Kids eat what they like,” says Morrison, who is in charge of food service at the school, among many other things. “Just like water runs down hill. If they don’t get it on our campus, they go downtown at lunch.”

When secondary and middle school students leave campus to eat fast food or grocery store fare, they often leave a wake of nonfood problems: fights, accidents, shoplifting, name calling, vandalism, and other things too numerous and unexpected to mention, most of which make schools look bad. At one school where I worked, I wondered why senior boys came back to campus soaking wet. Turns out they were driving to the beach and daring each other to jump from a high cement cliff into the roaring ocean, hanging their jackets on the sign that warned “Dangerous Rip Tides. No Swimming.” Visions of lawsuits ran through my head. Never mind bad diets.

Policies restricting students to campus during lunch period might sound draconian, and you can be sure the kids won’t like them, but they do give schools more control over what foods are available for lunch—and more supervision over what the kids are doing. A Kentucky policy on food service, for example, includes this statement about off-campus lunch: “Schools will require students to eat lunch on the school campus. Schools will not ‘reward’ students with the privilege of an ‘off-campus’ lunch on a routine basis.”

Making up for lost money

On the popular TV show “Boston Public,” one teacher is crusading against vending machines, while the assistant principal is defending them because of the needed revenue they provide. Sad but true. As Kathleen Vail pointed out in the February 1999 issue of this magazine, “Profits from school vending machines sales once were used to buy extras such as new athletic supplies and other extracurricular needs. Now cash-strapped schools use the money from candy and soda sales to buy office equipment, books, and even computers.”

Morrison says if junk food is banned on his campus, the student government will suffer greatly. Gone will be funds for sports, homecoming, and guest speakers, among other things. The money will have to come from somewhere. Or the programs will have to be dropped.

Minnesota schools raise about \$40 million a year through soft drink sales, according to Dick Anderson, the executive director of the Minnesota School Boards Association. “Schools didn’t just dive into this because they said, ‘Look, here’s a lucrative opportunity,’” Anderson says. “You could make the case that if the legislature mandates schools give up this revenue, they should be refunded for that.”

To its credit, the proposed California legislation does provide extra funding for schools that forgo vending machine revenue. But funding student activities with the educational equivalent of “sin taxes” has strong and credible critics, such as Cindy Perry, head nurse for the Coeur d’Alene (Idaho) School District. “Vending machines that sell the sugary snacks and soda pops mean that we are thinking of short-term benefits at

the expense of students’ long-term health,” Perry says.

This argument has won the day. Staff, boards, students, parents, service clubs, and boosters must seek new ways to raise funds. (Car washes might not be the answer, though: A town near me outlawed car-wash fund raisers because they are ecologically unsound.)

A losing battle?

Convincing studies show us that students with eating disorders—whether they are overweight or underweight—need extra counseling help and support. *Taking Center Stage*, a publication from the California Department of Education, tells middle school principals that “students whose weight exceeds what is considered normal ... should receive counseling from professionals in consultation with the children’s parents. When observed, signs of anorexia or bulimia should be considered threatening.”

Many students simply forgo lunch. As Point Arena student Toni Duncan told me, “I don’t eat lunch. I’m never hungry, and I am too busy.” She is a part of the approximately one-fifth of all students in our country who choose to go without lunch, according to *Kids and School Meals*.

Face it: These problems are only going to get worse. And the final irony is that even if we get it right, we get it wrong. No matter how carefully and thoughtfully we respond, there will always be critics banging at the doors and swinging through the windows.

In a recent article distributed by Tribune Media Services, Jacquelyn Mitchard blamed school lunches for the current childhood obesity epidemic. “The school cafeteria is a weapon that will strike children in the heart decades from now,” she wrote. “Children who are hooked on salt and fat-laden school lunches now will carry risk factors into adulthood.”

Marcia Smith, president of the American School Food Service Association (ASFS) and food service director of Polk County Schools in Florida, counters that argument. “All National School Lunch Program meals must meet the [U.S. Department of Agriculture’s] *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which recommend that no more than 30 percent of an individual’s calories come from fat, and less than 10 percent from saturated fat,” she said in a statement released by ASFS in October. “School lunches must also provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances of protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories.”

But no matter how nutritious a lunch your schools serve, kids will be kids. As Renee Kling observes, “Many students will bring numerous prepared sodium-packed fast foods with them from home.”

The bottom line: Whether students eat in the cafeteria, brown bag it, go to Mickey D’s, order in, or go without, our national dietary troubles are going to add to your already full plate. Get ready.

John Marlowe (mstrjack3@home.net), a former school administrator, is a freelance writer in Northern California.