



Teens Growing Up Well: Focus on Prevention

Fast Food in California's High Schools: Popular, Profitable, Contributing to Teen Obesity?

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Sales of "Fast Foods" in Schools May be Skyrocketing

California prides itself on being a national trendsetter, but it may be leading a trend harmful to the health of its youth. In a 1999 mail survey of California's school district food service directors (1), 90 percent of respondents said high schools in their district sold "fast foods" — foods typically high in fat, high in calories, and low in nutritional value. Because the survey used self-reported data from voluntary participants, its results cannot be generalized to all California high schools (1). However, the study offers insight into why California's high schools are selling fast foods and, as rates of adolescent obesity soar (2), it demonstrates the need to revisit state policies in this area.

Fast foods such as pizza, cookies, chips, and french fries are sold "à la carte" — separately from the National School Lunch Program. The National School Lunch Program mandates that lunch be available to all students, and that the foods served meet nutritional guidelines (3). À la carte sales are exempt from dietary guidelines (1). In California school districts responding to the recent survey, they comprised a majority of high school food sales (1).

Fifty-three percent of responding California school districts reported that their high schools sold Taco Bell; 22 percent sold Subway; and 19 percent sold Domino's (1). Because California has not monitored fast food sale trends, we lack data describing how this situation has changed over time. However, there has been a dramatic increase in these sales nationwide. In 1990–91, two percent of public schools participating in the National School Lunch Program sold brand-name fast foods; by 1995–96, that number had risen to 13 percent (3) (Table 1).

Why Sell Fast Foods?

California high schools turn to fast food sales to address a complex range of challenges. Students say fast foods taste good (4). Moreover, à la carte sales help school food service programs to remain financially stable, and add variety to the menu (1). Among districts that sell à la carte items, 88 percent reported using profits to support food service operations. Others said the profits pay for extracurricular activities, athletics, and educational programs (1).

The School Environment Affects Students' Eating Habits

The school environment can sabotage parents' and educators' efforts to teach healthy eating habits by exposing students to on-campus advertising, and offering ready access to unhealthy foods. Students can obtain balanced meals through the National School Lunch Program, but many do not choose these meals (1) (2). Short lunch periods, inadequate cafeteria seating, and long lunch lines prompt students to seek quick, convenient foods. They find a fast food "solution" available at school snack bars, snack carts, fast food stands, vending machines and school stores (1).

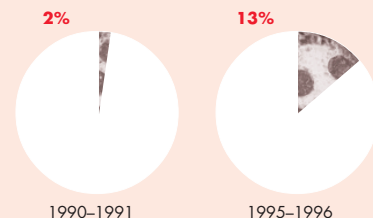
Moreover, school districts often allow private corporations to advertise on-campus as a way of generating funds. Among surveyed California school districts, 72 percent of respondents said their district's high schools permit advertising for brand-name fast foods and beverages (1). Many health experts find these practices alarming, citing exposure to on-campus advertising and the availability of unhealthy foods as contrary to "healthy eating" messages (5).

TABLE 1

Is California Leading a Trend Toward Fast Food in Schools?

NATIONWIDE

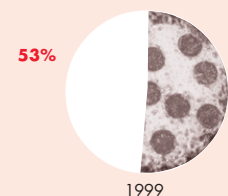
Percentage of public schools nationwide taking part in the lunch program and selling brand-name fast foods.



Source: U.S. General Accounting Office, *School Lunch Program: Role and Impacts of Private Food Service Companies*; August, 1996.

CALIFORNIA

Percentage of surveyed California school districts reporting that their high schools sell food from a nationally known fast food chain.



Source: Samuels & Associates, *California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings & Recommendations*; Public Health Institute, Berkeley, CA. February, 2000.

Will this Trend Impact the Health and Education of California's Youth?

One in four California adolescents is now considered “at risk” of becoming overweight (2). Why is the rate of teen obesity so high? Because young people are eating more calories and exercising less (4). Fast foods are an important part of this equation; they are high in fat, high in calories, and may supplant more nutritious foods in the diets of California's adolescents.

Obesity is linked to a variety of chronic diseases, including Type II diabetes, heart disease, stroke and cancer (4). Type II diabetes, a disease linked to obesity and once found primarily in adults, is now present in all United States adolescent populations (6).

The quality of adolescents' diet impacts their performance in school. Studies show that an appropriate diet can improve problem-solving skills, test scores and school attendance rates (7). Even moderate undernourishment can affect cognitive development and school performance (8).

Promising Policy Directions

Involve students in selecting, taste-testing and approving menu options that are healthy, appealing, convenient and low-priced.

California Project LEAN's Food on the Run campaign involves nutritionists and high school students in advocating for policy and environmental changes to promote healthy eating in their schools. Students who worked with food services to increase healthy options and conduct school-wide taste tests improved their knowledge, attitudes and healthy eating practices. Moreover, they succeeded in convincing their schools to offer healthy food choices that were acceptable to students (9).

References

- 1 Samuels & Associates, *California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations*. Public Health Institute, Berkeley, CA, February, 2000. This self-administered survey was mailed to all (323) district-level food service directors with a high school in their school district. Surveys were returned by 171 school districts, representing 345 high schools.
- 2 Foerster SB, Fierro MP, Gregson J, Hudes M, Oppen M, and Sugerman S. 1998. *California Teen Eating, Exercise, and Nutrition Survey: Also Profiling Body Weight and Tobacco Use- Media Highlights*. Public Health Institute, Berkeley, CA, September, 2000.
- 3 United States General Accounting Office, *Report to Congressional Committees. School Lunch Program: Role and Impacts of Private Food Service Companies*. August, 1996.
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- 5 Nestle M, Jacobson M. *Halting the Obesity Epidemic: A Public Health Policy Approach*. Public Health Reports, Vol. 115, January/ February 2000.
- 6 CDC Chronic Disease Notes & Reports, Vol. 12 No. 2, Spring/Summer 1999.
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- 10 Agron P, Takada E, Purcell A. *California Project LEAN's Food on the Run Program: An evaluation of a high school-based student advocacy nutrition and physical activity program*. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, Supplement: Adolescent Nutrition, 2001 (In Press).

Regulate foods sold on school grounds to meet the fat and sugar content standards of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the California Daily Food Guide.

Only foods sold through the National School Lunch Program are currently regulated. Evidence suggests that extending regulation to à la carte items is an effective way to improve the nutritional value of foods sold in school. For example, the West Virginia Board of Education's Child Nutrition Policy mandates that all foods served in school meet the national dietary guidelines. Non-nutritious foods such as candy and chewing gum cannot be sold during the school day (10).

Provide incentives and resources to encourage schools to produce school-branded versions of students' favorite foods, in order to limit fat and sugar content.

Fourteen percent of California school districts responding to the California High School Fast Food Survey market foods under a district brand-name. Through this approach, districts modify foods to reduce fat and sugar content through changes such as using low-fat cheese on pizza or low-fat beans in burritos. Experts believe this has a beneficial effect on reducing calories without reducing sales (1).

Explore new opportunities to generate revenue that are not based on the sale of unhealthy food.

Information is needed from students and parents on the reasons why students do not participate in the National School Lunch Program. For many schools, feeding students nutritious meals and having enough money to do so have become contradictory pursuits. Food service departments need resources to help them promote healthy food choices.



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