

## **Schools should promote healthy choices**

By Juliet Sims, Berkeley

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I am not at all surprised that the food and beverage industry has quickly reformulated many of their products to meet California's new school-food standards.

These companies are competing for new markets and mouths, and school children are a captive audience. As long as food and beverage companies are able to start our children on their products young, they gain a lifelong customer; it doesn't much matter whether brand loyalty is gained via soda, sports drink, or juice.

Shouldn't our kids be able to attend public school without exposure to marketing by companies whose products are contributing to childhood obesity?

California's new school-food standards are an important first step, but the government needs to do more to ensure that the school environment is a place that supports our kids growing up healthy.

## **Original article**

By Stacy Finz

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Despite a new law designed to ban the sale of junk food at California schools, the kiosk at Santa Clara High is stocked with chocolate-chip cookies, the lunch window at Novato High serves up potato chips, and the concession stand at Albany High is doing a booming business in Cheetos.

But don't call the food police. All three districts are in compliance with the state law that requires snacks and individual entrees sold on campus to contain fewer calories and less fat and sugar.

It seems that while kids were preparing to go back to school this fall, food manufacturers were busy re-creating their products - shrinking portions, eliminating trans fats and baking instead of frying - to make them meet the requirements of the Food Nutrition Standards Bill by July 1.

The statute is intended to improve students' diets by nudging them into eating a well-rounded healthful lunch. But so far, that goal has proved elusive. Some campuses, such as Piedmont Middle School, appear to be ignoring the regulations altogether. And others let kids make a meal of revamped snack foods.

According to food industry statistics, in the last year more than 10,000 products have been either introduced or reformulated to contain less fat and sugar. Now, snacks such as Nutter Butters, Rice Krispies Treats, nacho-flavored Baked Doritos and barbecue Corn Nuts comply with the school nutrition standards.

Although these products meet the letter of the law, do they meet the spirit?

"Taking away a little fat and a little sugar does not convert highly processed foods into healthful foods," said Marion Nestle, professor of food studies and public health at New York University and author of "What to Eat." "The kids are still eating junk foods. They are just better-for-you junk foods, and put quotes around 'better-for-you.' "

The legislation, passed in 2005 as Senate Bill 12, was carried by former Sen. Martha Escutia, D-Montebello (Los Angeles County), and sponsored by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the California School Boards Association. It was intended to reduce childhood obesity and diseases associated with poor nutrition by ridding schools of empty-calorie snacks and fattening entrees.

No longer, officials hoped, would kids be able to make a lunch out of a bag or two of Doritos from a campus vending machine or a couple of cookies from the snack cart. Ideally, officials anticipated that the snack bars on campus would be shuttered. The idea was that, without junk food, students would be lured into the cafeteria, where a full meal approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture awaited.

But Bay Area kids are still making lunches out of pizza, cookies and chips - albeit mostly baked ones - because those items continue to be sold.

Taylor Keating, a seventh grader at Piedmont Middle School, bought a mini-pizza for lunch from the concession stand on campus earlier this week. But there are times, she said, when she'll skip the entree altogether and spend some of her lunch money on a bag of chips.

"One of my friends always eats chips and cookies for lunch," she said. "Her parents are really into being healthy, so that's her only chance to get junk food."

Food manufacturers won't talk about how they've reformulated their products for proprietary reasons, but companies such as Frito-Lay, Kellogg's and Kraft Foods all have snack lines that comply with the new law. They say they, too, want to fight the battle of the bulge, but they don't want to deprive consumers of choice.

"The industry is committed to providing products that promote health and wellness," said Robert Earl, senior director for nutrition policy at the Grocery Manufacturers Association, a trade group. "Companies are doing everything from portion packs to baked chips."

In order to adhere to California nutrition requirements, snacks sold in middle and high schools can have no more than 250 calories; in elementary schools, snacks must be 175 calories or less. No more than 35 percent of the snack's calories can come from fat and no more than 10 percent from saturated fat. Sugar is limited to 35 percent by weight.

Fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes, nut butters, seeds, eggs and cheese are excluded from the regulations, as is food brought from home.

Individually sold entrees such as pizza, burritos and hamburgers can't be more than 400 calories, with a maximum of 4 grams of fat per 100 calories. The law does not limit how many snacks or entrees students can buy at a time.

In addition, half of the drinks sold on high school campuses must be juice, water and low-fat or non-fat milk. In 2009 all soda will be banned (it already is banned from elementary and middle schools). The sale of sugary athletic drinks is still permitted.

"The standards are some of the most rigorous in the country," says Phyllis Bramson-Paul, California Department of Education's director of nutrition services. She says that the California statute is a model for other agencies, including the Institute of Medicine, which is part of the National Academy of Sciences. The institute, at the behest of Congress, published its own recommendations for school snacks in July. They resemble California's but are even stricter, suggesting that fruit, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat or non-fat dairy be the only snacks sold on campus.

NYU's Nestle, a leading nutrition expert, warns that policies like California's, dictated by fat, sugar and calorie content, sometimes are rife with problems. The reality, she says, is that foods with minimal nutrition value squeak in under the wire.

Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy and one of the designers of the statute, countered that even had the state's lawmakers eliminated individual foods from schools, manufacturers still would have found ways to sneak them back in.

"If we had banned candy bars, the manufacturers would have said, 'This isn't a candy bar, this is a brownie. If we had banned brownies, they would have said, 'This isn't a brownie, it's a cookie.' If we had banned cookies, they would have said, 'This is bread.'"

"What's really important for parents and students to understand is that these are not healthy food standards," Goldstein said. "They were meant to weed out the worst of the worst."

Bramson-Paul said the overall goal is to move kids away from the a la carte items to a balanced meal.

"If snack foods become less appealing or nonexistent, the cafeteria gets a second look," she said.

But to make that happen, school districts have to work at it. Some, including San Francisco and Berkeley, started purging their halls of junk food even before SB12 passed. Others, like Piedmont, are still serving foods that are too fattening - Pop Tarts containing

400 calories, potato chips with more than 50 percent calories from fat and Sun Chips with 38 percent calories from fat.

"Our parent club runs the food concession," said Piedmont Middle School principal Jeanne Donovan. "They are having their first meeting next week to look at how we can move toward these guidelines. In the meantime, we are serving more healthful foods and will continue to."

Amy Honigman-Tobe, president of Piedmont Middle School's parents club, said the club just does the accounting for the program and is not qualified to make nutrition decisions.

The Legislature did not spell out how to penalize districts that break the law, said Bramson-Paul, adding that offenders at least will be required to submit a corrective-action plan. But discovering which schools are noncompliant could prove difficult. The Department of Education has money for only one monitor, who works out of Sacramento and primarily tracks schools in the San Joaquin Valley.

For some districts that are adhering to the rules, getting rid of snacks and individually sold items has been difficult - especially because campus food-service programs are pressured to at least break even. The cafeteria competes with sack lunches brought from home, and schools with open campuses contend with students heading out to nearby fast-food joints and convenience stores.

At Mill Valley's Mount Tamalpais Elementary School, instead of serving cafeteria lunches, the Parent-Teacher Association sells meals purchased from popular local restaurants. They say the kids like the food. Bramson-Paul is not pleased, however, saying that a steady diet of restaurant food is unlikely to meet either the requirements of the balanced federal lunch program or the new state law.

Jane McDonough, a principal in the district and food liaison between the PTA and the schools, argued that her schools not only comply with the new regulations but adhere to the USDA's lunch standard of a balanced meal of 640 calories.

At Palo Alto High School, on any given lunch break you can find more than half of the student body at the shopping center across the street buying candy, burritos, deli sandwiches, pizza and French pastries.

"The food here isn't too good," freshman Renel Sun said about the offerings at her school. "The only thing I buy are the chocolate-chip cookies. I can't get them across the street."

It's no wonder that the district's lunch program has been running at a significant loss for some time, said Greg Lynch, Palo Alto Unified School District's new food services director.

"I'd just as soon that we didn't sell potato chips on campus," he said. "I'd rather sell fruit and vegetables." But Lynch says that in order to compete, he has to keep the a la carte program going.

Miguel Villarreal, director of the Novato Unified School District, has been making lunches for students with organic produce as part of the Farm-to-School program, supplied to by local growers. He hopes to eventually get rid of the baked potato chips and sell more vegetables and fruit.

Albany Unified School District's executive chef Clell Hoffman says next month he'll stop selling individual entrees on campus. He wants to steer kids to the cafeteria's hot lunch and the more healthful fruit cups, salads and yogurts. But the chips and cookies will stay. Hoffman's philosophy is that eating a treat during the school day isn't going to kill anyone.

"There's such a thing as comfort food," he said. "The emotional satisfaction you get from a snack while you're at school all day trying to learn is just as important as any physical benefits."

Juan Cordon, food service consultant at Santa Clara Unified School District, said in the last few years he's been trying to push kids into eating a full cafeteria lunch and no longer sells the worst of the a la carte offenders like corn dogs and cheeseburgers. But to keep financially afloat, he has to keep selling low-calorie cookies and baked chips.

"If we were completely subsidized we could turn the whole thing around," he said. "Unfortunately, however, there's not as much money in selling salads and homemade granola."

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## **THE LAW**

California's School Food Nutrition Standards Bill (formerly SB12) went into effect on July 1. Here are the highlights:

- Snacks sold in middle and high schools must be 250 calories or less; in elementary schools, they must be 175 calories or less.
- Fat can account for no more than 35 percent of a snack's calories.
- Saturated fat can account for no more than 10 percent of a snack's calories.
- Sugar can be no more than 35 percent by weight.

-- Fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes, nut butters, seeds, eggs and cheese are excluded from the regulations, as is food brought from home.

-- Individually sold entrees such as pizza, burritos and hamburgers must be 400 calories or less, with no more than 4 grams of fat per 100 calories.

-- Other state law bans sale of soda in elementary and middle schools, although it can still be sold in high schools. Sugary athletic drinks are permitted. However, half of the drinks sold in high schools must be juice, water or low-fat or nonfat milk. In 2009, all soda sales will be banned from high schools.

Manufacturers won't say exactly how they reformulated the product, but they shrunk portions, reduced calories, fat and sugar.

### **School nutrition resources**

For previous Chronicle stories about school nutrition, see the links with this story on *sfgate.com*.

-- For a summary of the School Food Nutrition Standards Bill, go to [publichealthadvocacy.org/PDFs/SB12Summary.pdf](http://publichealthadvocacy.org/PDFs/SB12Summary.pdf)

-- The California Center for Public Health Advocacy: [publichealthadvocacy.org](http://publichealthadvocacy.org)

-- California Department of Education: [cde.ca.gov](http://cde.ca.gov)

-- Federal nutrition standards: [mypyramid.gov](http://mypyramid.gov)

-- Institute of Medicine recommendations: [iom.edu](http://iom.edu)

-- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov](http://cdc.gov)

### **What you can do to support the law**

If you suspect that a school may be out of compliance with state nutrition standards:

1 First, determine if the food or beverage is being sold outside of the USDA meal program (for example, in the student store, as a fundraiser, in the snack bar, from a vending machine or as an a la carte item) and during school hours.

2 Next, obtain a copy of the school's wellness policy to determine if competitive food sales (those sold outside of the meal program), including fundraisers, are addressed in the policy.

3 If so, contact the person the district has put in charge of monitoring compliance with the district's wellness policy.

4 If the issue cannot be resolved at the local level, or if the district wellness policy does not mention "competitive" foods, contact [NSDEXEC@cde.ca.gov](mailto:NSDEXEC@cde.ca.gov) to determine if the product in question is allowable or if the issue needs to be addressed by the California Department of Education.