



Kids are getting fatter and fatter. Are your school food service policies part of the problem?

BY KATHLEEN VAIL

THE BESITY EPIDEMIC

Jacqueline Domac doesn't need statistics to tell her that America's children are getting fatter. The proof is in front of her every day.

"I teach freshmen, and when they graduate I almost don't recognize them," says Domac, a health teacher at Venice High School in Los Angeles.

Domac was a catalyst in persuading the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) board to ban junk food and carbonated drink sales at the district's 713 campuses starting in 2004 (Jan. 1 for sodas, July 1 for snacks). "We're getting out of the business of promoting it," she says of the fatty, sugar-laden snacks and drinks. "We were practically shoving it down their throats."

Concern over what kids are eating—in and out of school—has exploded in the past two years. Study after study shows that American children are becoming overweight and obese in dangerously high numbers.

Why are kids getting so fat? There are no easy answers. The proliferation of super-sized meals, ubiquitous fast-food restaurants, and less time and fewer options for physical activity are among the reasons offered. Not to mention that adults are steadily becoming more obese as well.

Not surprisingly, schools are in the bull's-eye of the child-

hood obesity furor. Nutritionists and public health advocates believe the sodas, chips, and cookies that children purchase from vending machines and school cafeterias are partly to blame. Under particular scrutiny are districts' lucrative, exclusive vending contracts with beverage and snack companies.

Over the past year, Los Angeles Unified—the nation's second largest school district—and others have halted the sale of nonnutritious drinks and snacks in an effort to curb student obesity. Public health activists and others concerned about child welfare hope that more school districts will follow.

Boards that don't do so voluntarily could be faced with legal action. John Banzhaf, an attorney who was instrumental in bringing lawsuits against tobacco companies, says school boards that make soft drinks and other low-nutrition foods available to students are targets for litigation.

"All school boards and board members who have approved these 'Cokes for kickbacks' contracts will be vulnerable," Banzhaf says.

How fat are they?

The rise in childhood obesity has so alarmed public health officials and physicians that many are calling it an epidemic. The statistics paint a grim picture of student health.

An estimated 15 percent of children ages 6 to 19 are over-

weight—almost 9 million children and teenagers, according to a 1999-2000 study by the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. That amount is nearly triple the number of children who were overweight in 1980. What's more, another 15 percent of children in the age group are considered at risk for becoming overweight.

Younger children are affected as well. More than 10 percent of preschoolers, ages 2 to 5, are considered overweight—a 7 percent increase since 1994.

“Overweight and obese children face serious medical and social consequences,” says Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders and the author of *Food Fight*, a book on the obesity epidemic. “For the first time in this country's history, health experts question if this generation of children will be first to lead shorter lives.”

Obese and overweight kids are more likely to become overweight adults. They are more likely to develop asthma, high blood pressure, and joint and orthopedic problems. But the health dangers don't stop there.

Adult-onset diabetes is now called Type 2 diabetes to reflect the fact that not just adults but many children are contracting the disease. Doctors estimate that about 90 percent of Type 2 diabetes, which generally shows up in people 40 and older, is related to obesity. Among new cases of childhood diabetes, CDC researchers estimate that anywhere from 8 to 45 percent can be classified as Type 2.

One reason is poor nutrition. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, less than 15 percent of school children eat the recommended servings of fruit each day; less than 20 percent consume the right amount of vegetables; less than 25 percent eat the recommended servings of grains; and only 30 percent consume the recommended milk-group servings in a given day.

A small but increasing body of evidence shows that poor nutrition and obesity affect student behavior and even academics. “When schools realize that an overnourished child will not perform as well on standardized tests and other measures, what children eat will quickly be considered central to the school's mission,” says Brownell. “If these children are pumping themselves with sugar and fat, they won't do as well academically.”

Is there a connection between sodas and nonnutritious vending machine snacks and the fact that students aren't getting enough of the right nutrients? Some research suggests there is. According to a study by the Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine, students in schools where snack foods are available consumed 50 percent less fruit, juice, and vegetables than students without such access.

“The sales of soft drinks and snack foods in machines is contributing a lot of calories,” Brownell says. “Cafeterias are selling unhealthy choices along with healthy ones. To state it bluntly, I don't believe most schools are a safe nutrition environment.”

Can soda sales get you sued?

Children who have a choice between candy and chips and the cafeteria's meat loaf special are likely to opt for the junk food. But some educators and public health advocates also believe that adults and schools are, in effect, endorsing the products by making them available at all.

This belief is at the heart of John Banzhaf's legal argument. Banzhaf, a law professor at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., was part of the legal team that sued fast-food giant McDonald's last summer on behalf of two overweight youths. The lawsuits alleged that the restaurant chain failed to let the teens know that eating too much of its food was unhealthy.

That the lawsuits were eventually thrown out did not deter Banzhaf. That they were scoffed at doesn't deter him either. He notes that many of the first tobacco lawsuits were dismissed and considered laughable. But the tobacco companies aren't laughing now.

Banzhaf's legal argument against schools is this: A child's candy purchase at the corner convenience store is, in the eyes of the law, a very different transaction from the child's purchase of candy from a school cafeteria vending machine.

Why? The first is an “arm's-length” transaction, Banzhaf says. Both participants are equal, and the seller has no particular responsibility to the buyer. Doctors, lawyers, and some others have a responsibility to their clients, however, and school districts fall into this category.

“They have a special and stronger obligation to protect you,” says Banzhaf. Schools boards and schools, he says, have a fiduciary responsibility to their students.

“Students don't have the knowledge, skill, and maturity of the school board.” Banzhaf says. “Both the students and parents put a special trust in the school. As a parent, you assume the school will not permit your child to do things that are not healthful to the child.”

Getting rid of contracts with soda companies is not easy, especially in these cash-strapped times. Schools are increasingly dependent on vending machine revenue to pay for field trips and extracurricular activities. And exclusive contracts offer larger financial incentives when, in exchange for even more money, schools agree not to use rival products.

As the Seattle Public Schools eyed the renewal of its exclusive contract with Coca-Cola last summer, Banzhaf and a Seat-

the lawyer threatened to sue the board. But Nancy Waldman, the board president, says she didn't take the threat under consideration when she cast her vote against renewing the contract.

"The threat didn't influence my decision one whit," says Waldman, who was on the short end of a 4-3 vote.

Even if the board was not worried about potential lawsuits, the new contract with Coca-Cola was altered considerably. The previous contract ran for five years, and the district faced financial penalties if it was broken. The new contract can be broken at will by either party.

As part of the renewed contract, machines at Seattle's middle schools will not be turned on during the school day. A third of all vending slots will be filled with water or 100 percent juice drinks.

Banzhaf says that he and his associates are monitoring districts and their vending contracts in Massachusetts, Texas, Washington state, and others. Child obesity, he says, is a serious public health issue that requires quick action. And for better or worse, lawsuits get people's attention.

"Often it's more effective, easier, and quicker to change conduct and attitudes with lawsuits than [with] appeals to reason and general education," says Banzhaf. "If we wait for school board members to think this is wrong, a lot of kids will be obese."

Vending machine shuffle

Lawsuits or no, the tide seems to be turning against keeping soda and snack vending machines in schools. Several other large districts, including New York City, are considering banning or limiting the sale of these items. Some state legislatures, including California, are crafting laws to do the same.

Change is never easy, especially where money is concerned, and in Los Angeles, Domac found that eliminating vending machines was a touchy topic. She first confronted the problem

when a student asked her to find out if Venice High could offer fruit juice in its machines. Domac inquired and was told that modifying the vending choices would violate the contract. That led her to start the healthy food campaign.

Before the LAUSD board altered its policy, Venice High had already changed vendors, in part with money from a California state grant. The school now offers healthy snacks, water, and fruit juice in its vending machines. It also has the first organic soy milk machine in the country, Domac says. The revamped vending machines lost money at first, but revenues have since rebounded and actually have increased by \$1,000 over a year's time, she says.

The fear of losing money is often what keeps districts from changing vending machine policies. When Old Orchard Beach School District in Portland, Maine, received a state grant, school health coordinator Jackie Tselikis worked to change the district's vending machine offerings. Tselikis says just bringing up the subject was sensitive at first because so many school groups benefited from the money.

"You have to talk them into voluntarily working with you. It's a big problem because people think they are going to lose money," says Tselikis.

Tselikis worked with Coca-Cola to replace the soft drinks with water and fruit juice, and the chips and cookies with cereal, trail mix, pretzels, and fruit snacks. The district has not seen a decline in revenue. "Kids will buy whatever is there. If you have soda, they'll buy soda. If you have water, they will buy water," says Tselikis.

Schools under contractual obligations might be limited in what they can do with their offerings. Banzhaf suggests schools consider offering healthy drinks and snacks at lower prices than the nutritionally challenged food. Also, he says, schools can post calorie counts for each snack and beverage on the machine so students can see them before making a purchase.

What's in the vending machines is only one piece of the obesity puzzle, however. The school lunch program is another.

The cafeteria conundrum

What is served in the cafeteria could be as much a factor in children's nutrition as what they can get from school vending machines. Many kids—especially low-income children—eat two of their three meals a day at school.

Federal school lunch guidelines require that those meals meet certain nutritional goals. But unlike many other school services, child nutrition programs are set up to make money. And the à la carte line—where students may purchase individual items instead of an entire lunch—is outside the federal guidelines' purview.

To make money, some school nutritionists and dieticians say, you have to give students what they want, which means pizza, cheeseburgers, nachos, French fries, cookies, brownies, and candy. As a result, menus in many school cafeterias resemble those in a mall food court or a fast-food restaurant.

Some, however, are debunking the notion that healthy foods can't make money. Beverly Girard, director of food and

RESOURCES ON SCHOOL HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Action for Healthy Kids: www.actionforhealthykids.org.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's obesity information: www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/index.htm.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest's School Foods Tool Kit: www.cspinet.org/schoolfood/index.html.

Jacqueline Domac's Web site: www.nojunkfood.org.

National School Boards Association's School Health programs: www.nsba.org/schoolhealth.

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Team Nutrition: www.fns.usda.gov/tn/.

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—Kelly Brownell

nutrition services at Florida’s Sarasota District Schools, says she runs a profitable business without resorting to the fast-food approach. And her program serves six million lunches a year.

“We stress variety, fruits, and vegetables,” says Girard, a registered dietician with a master’s degree in business. “I don’t believe in putting junk food on the [à la carte] line and saying we aren’t responsible.”

Hired by Sarasota 12 years ago to fix a financially ailing program that was \$500,000 in the red, she turned the budget around and revamped the food offerings. “We had a salad bar where kids were taking [only] bacon bits and salad dressing,” she says.

Sarasota’s à la carte offerings now include individually prepared salads, sandwiches, and overstuffed subs. Children who participate in the breakfast program choose from freshly baked bread and rolls, oatmeal, scrambled eggs, French toast, and pancakes. The cafeteria serves chocolate milk, but it’s skim milk. This saves the program money because whole milk is priced higher than 2 percent or skim.

Girard says Sarasota’s program wouldn’t be successful without an essential element: nutrition education. Her program, which focuses on elementary-age children, includes a nutrition educator who is paid out of the school lunch program budget.

“You can’t put out healthy foods and assume [kids] will eat it unless they know something,” she says.

Teach them to eat green beans

Many nutritionists and dieticians agree with Girard: Children won’t make healthy choices unless they are exposed to nutritional food and taught about it. If that doesn’t happen at home—and evidence shows that often it doesn’t—then schools must do it. This is especially important for schools in low-income neighborhoods where fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods may not be readily available.

“If you don’t modify a child’s dietary patterns by third grade, it’s very difficult,” Girard says.

Sarasota’s nutrition educator holds tasting parties for students. Children sample various fruits and vegetables and learn about how they’re grown and their nutritional value.

“It’s amazing that many children haven’t eaten an apple or an orange,” says Girard, noting that the students’ attitudes change after they learn about the foods and try them. “When they go the cafeteria, they don’t shun them.”

Antonia Demas, director of the nonprofit Food Studies Institute in Trumansburg, N.Y., and a longtime child nutrition re-

searcher, has developed a curriculum based on teaching children how to make and sample nutritious foods. An education program must engage children’s senses other than sight, she says.

While attending Cornell University, Demas embarked on a controlled study to see if children who were exposed to new and nutritious foods would eat the food when it was offered to them. Every two weeks, children in one group were introduced to a new healthy recipe, while others in a control group were not. Then the food was served in the cafeteria.

Without exception, she said, the control group children wouldn’t try the new food, but the students who had sampled it previously ate it up. “When kids had a hand in preparing the foods, they would eat them,” she says, noting that students also took the recipes home and introduced the new foods to their families.

Nutrition education has been lacking, Demas says, because many administrators and educators see the food service program as outside the school realm rather than as a part of it.

“Without the education, the kids won’t eat healthy things,” she says. “They are being bombarded by the food industry to eat the bad stuff, and there is nothing countering that. Schools shouldn’t shrug their shoulders and mimic the fast-food industry.”

Real change can start at school

Filling vending machines and cafeterias with healthy foods will not make childhood obesity go away, health advocates acknowledge. The obesity problem is too complex and includes a number of different factors to have a single solution.

But real changes can and do happen in school. “The schools will be where the first victories against obesity will occur,” *Food Fight* author Brownell says.

Says Margie Bradford, a school board member in Bardstown, Ky., and a registered nurse: “Schools are responsible for teaching the children. Children who are healthy and eat more nutritious foods are better learners. It’s in the best interest of the school itself to see the child has good nutrition and exercise.”

A big task, yes, and a daunting one, considering that the future health of children is at stake. But as Venice High School’s Domac says, “Just because you can’t do everything, it’s no excuse to do nothing.”

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by Susan Black on page 34.