

Right at the Curb: Mobile Food Vending Near School Campuses



CFPA is sponsoring AB 1678, authored by Assemblymember Bill Monning, to protect and promote student health by restricting mobile food vending near school campuses. Below, hear from a Californian who has first-hand experience with this issue.

Leo Politi Elementary School, Los Angeles Unified School District Principal Bradley Rumble

Principal Bradley Rumble describes the challenges presented by mobile vending near his elementary school campus before and after school hours:

My students line up to start the school day at 7:55am. In the morning, there is a vendor who sells champurrado, a highly sweetened drink, across the street. Kids are starting their day with a huge sugar injection. That affects attention and learning, not to mention health.

Our after school program is huge. We serve up to 300 students who stay on campus until 5:00 or 5:15pm. From 4:30 to 5:30pm, snack carts and ice cream trucks converge nearby. Our after school programs do offer a snack every day. The vendors near our campus are selling things like shaved ice, cotton candy, and chicharones [deep-fried pork rinds].

Mr. Rumble and his staff have worked to create a safe haven for students. As he explains:

We are a pre-K through 5th grade school serving a population that is 100% eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. We're an inner city campus and we are a safe center for the community. I try to be direct and courteous with mobile vendors. I understand this is their livelihood. But we have a responsibility to protect students.

The team at Leo Politi Elementary School recognizes the important role that environments play in shaping health and academic achievement:

We work to serve our students in innovative ways. For example, we've partnered with the LA Audubon Society to restore our schoolyard as natural wildlife habitat. Since then, our science scores have gone through the roof because our students are engaged in a whole new way.

How can we mirror that success? How can we create a space that encourages good nutrition? My goal is to establish a school and family garden on our campus. We also need to continue educating parents and students about diet. And we shouldn't have mobile vendors congregating near our schools serving unhealthy foods.

**Contact: Tia Shimada | 510.433.1122 x 109 | tia@cfpa.net
www.cfpa.net**

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San Marcos Elementary School Principal Stephanie Wallace

As the principal at San Marcos Elementary School, Stephanie Wallace has worked hard to create an environment that promotes and fosters healthy lifestyles for her students. The school's curriculum includes frequent nutrition lessons and opportunities for physical activity like a recess running club. Students at San Marcos Elementary have access to school lunch and school breakfast each day as well as healthy snacks from the federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. All of these efforts are hampered by the mobile vending of unhealthy beverages and snacks right outside the San Marcos Elementary School campus.

Three or four years ago, a local health foundation¹ came to our school to test 5th grade students for obesity and diabetes. Our numbers were incredibly high. Since then, I've been paying close attention to all the things that impact our students' health. Every day I look out my office window and see three ice cream trucks parked literally one foot away from our campus.

Mobile vendors conduct business so close to San Marcos Elementary School that students are able to make purchases without really leaving campus. "At least when the trucks parked around the corner," says Principal Wallace, "students had to walk 5 minutes if they were going to buy ice cream." Now once school is over, students can walk to the sidewalk bordering the campus, purchase drinks or snacks, and return in time for after school programs. Mobile vending not only detracts from San Marco Elementary School's focus on good nutrition, it poses a threat to student safety.

The trucks park right near our school exit. Students crowd this area and block the sidewalk while they make purchases. All of this activity creates traffic jams and causes parents and students to walk in the street. This isn't just about nutrition, but also about safety. I've asked our local sheriffs to help with this issue, but the vendors aren't breaking any laws. I've asked the vendors to leave, but they're still here every day.

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¹ P21 TODAY Diabetes Screening- Community Action Council, Palomar Pomerado Health

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Novato Unified School District **Miguel Villarreal, Nutrition Services Director**

In December 2012, the City Council of Novato, CA established an ordinance that prohibits mobile food vending within 1,500 feet of school campuses from 7:30am to 4:00pm on regular school days. Miguel Villarreal, the nutrition services director for Novato Unified School District (NUSD), describes the conditions that prompted the new ordinance:

Our high schools had up to six trucks parked right next to campus at one time. More and more students were congregating nearby and schools were having difficulty providing adequate supervision. We heard concerns from principals about the aggressive competition between vendors. Principals were also troubled about so many kids spilling out into the streets, kids completely blocking the sidewalk, and kids encroaching on neighboring private property. Luckily we had no traffic accidents, but there were close calls.

Mobile food vending is particularly significant for NUSD's high schools because of open campus policies. However, mobile food vending has also been prevalent near the district's middle schools during after-school hours.

In addition to concerns about student safety, Mr. Villarreal says, "Of course, I was also concerned about the mobile vending from a nutrition standpoint." NUSD staff observed that the vendors near their campuses, primarily consisting of ice cream trucks, were not providing full, healthy meals like those offered through the district-operated federal nutrition programs. Furthermore:

Mobile vending competes with our school nutrition programs. I know that the city was concerned about supporting local commerce and small business, but school nutrition programs are both a service for students and a local business. My department has to do what is best for students and, at the same time, remain fiscally solvent.

The conditions necessitating Novato's ordinance on mobile food vending exist throughout the state. California has taken significant steps to build safe, healthy school environments for all students. Restricting mobile food vending near schools campuses will help protect and strengthen those efforts.

This ordinance was five years in the making. The city and school district engaged in a long, challenging process to get to this point. But it was worth it. Now we have an additional – and important – tool to support student nutrition and protect student safety. We certainly would have benefitted from a statewide policy. We ought to have a law that helps all schools in California address the challenges presented by mobile vending near their campuses.

Statewide regulation of mobile food vending near school campuses is necessary to safeguard California's investments in the health and safety of all students across our state.

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