

Nutrition advocates target Fresno Unified's menu

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By Valerie Gibbons / The Fresno Bee

The syrup packets and sodas are gone -- but chocolate milk might stay.

The Fresno Unified School District finds itself in the middle of a statewide fight to slash the sugar, salt and fat in school breakfast and lunch menus.

At the center of the most recent debate: chocolate milk.

Local school food-service managers say they already go to great lengths to ensure their meals are healthy.

But to some local advocacy groups, the menus at Fresno Unified -- and other Valley districts that receive money from the federal government to operate their meal programs -- need an overhaul.

Edie Jessup, Fresno County director of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, said nutrition advocates are targeting Valley districts because many students -- more than 80% in the Fresno and Madera unified districts -- qualify for free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches.

"This might be the only nutritious meal they eat all day," she said.

Jessup said the group eventually hopes to enact sweeping changes in school menus, saying healthy alternatives offered at other California schools, like salad bars in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and freshly prepared low-fat options remain out of reach here in the Valley. She said the district is relying too much on outside vendors for their foods and don't have enough control over the ingredients.

All of the major districts in the Valley use vendors for at least a portion of their meals, although most breakfast and lunch entrees are cooked at district kitchens.

"I see this as a very serious health issue," Jessup said. "Fresno Unified should be producing their own food in their own facility -- and reformulating it to reduce sweeteners, sodium and fat."

Districts defend choices

Local cafeteria managers insist they're moving in the right direction when it comes to providing healthy choices.

Districts already have taken soda out of vending machines, scaled back on sugar-laden snacks and redesigned menu options to fit stricter state and federal guidelines.

It's no small task in a district such as Fresno Unified, which serves 22,500 breakfasts, 54,700 lunches and 7,200 snacks a day.

"Our focus has always been on increasing the participation in breakfast and lunch," said Jose Alvarado, Fresno Unified's food services director. "But the students have to like what they're eating."

Alvarado said Fresno Unified uses local vendors such as Producers Dairy so the district can keep tabs on ingredients and quality. He even has gone so far as to take away the syrup packets from breakfasts.

The district also has an agreement with a stone-fruit distributor in Dinuba to provide fresh-picked fruit during the season for lunches.

"It's picked one day and the next day it's on the kids' plate," Alvarado said.

Madera Unified, which has the highest percentage of students qualifying for free lunches of the Valley's major districts, receives a grant to provide a farmer's market-style sampling of fresh fruit at schools each morning.

Districts get much of their meat donated by the USDA and use vendors for many of the staples -- bread, dairy, cheese and produce. Many districts use outside companies for processed foods such as baked cheese sticks or breakfast sandwiches.

This year, state rules say snacks such as cookies and popcorn sold in schools are required to have fewer than 250 calories.

Burritos and sandwiches can't have more than 400 calories.

California law requires school lunches to meet one-third of the recommended daily allowances for protein, calcium, iron, vitamin A and vitamin C. No more than 30% of lunches' calories can come from fat and less than 10% of calories from saturated fat.

Larger districts like Madera, Fresno and Visalia hold yearly taste tests, where students decide on the next year's offerings.

"You want to serve as many kids as you can so you want to look at what the kids like," said Lynnelle Grumbles, director of nutrition services at Visalia Unified. "It doesn't matter what's in it if the kids won't eat it."

Following L.A.'s lead

A ban on chocolate milk is No. 1 on the wish list for nutrition advocates.

Flavored milk was banned at the Los Angeles Unified School District with the help of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver during the summer.

Now the Fresno Medical Society and the California Regional Obesity Prevention Program have vowed to go door-to-door to force Fresno to follow suit.

A key lobbyist for the Fresno ban is the Oakland-based California Food Policy Advocates, which argued successfully for the chocolate milk ban at Los Angeles Unified. The organization also is seeking similar bans at Long Beach and Compton school districts, said Nicola Edwards, a nutrition-policy advocate.

Edwards pointed to a state law passed last year that forbids child-care providers from serving chocolate- or strawberry-flavored milk.

"If you can't give it out at a day care, there's no reason why it should be given out at a school," she said.

The Dairy Council of California disagrees, saying last month that chocolate milk is an important source of calcium and "adding a limited amount of sugars to foods that provide important nutrients -- such as whole-grain cereal,

flavored milk or yogurt -- to improve their taste, especially for children, is a better use of added sugars than nutrient-poor, highly sweetened foods."

Fresno schools offer 8-ounce cartons of chocolate milk at breakfast and lunch. Each carton has 28 grams of sugar, more than half of which is added for flavor and has no nutritional value, Edwards' group said. The American Heart Association recommends children consume no more than 12 grams of sugar a day.

Jessup said her group was in talks with the district for six months to purge chocolate milk from the menu before the beginning of the 2010-11 school year.

When classes started with no changes to the menu, the group appealed to the board of trustees, started organizing public meetings and says it's gathered 1,000 signatures supporting a ban.

Alvarado said the district isn't convinced yet -- and the decision to keep chocolate milk on the menu will be left up to parents.

The district is planning a phone survey and will meet with parent, student and local advocacy groups to get opinions.

Flavored milk also is on the menu at Clovis, Central, Madera and Visalia unified school districts.

'A long way to go'

Edwards says nutrition advocates have a long fight on their hands.

"We still need to lower the amount of sugar and fat we serve in schools," she said.

She lauded Los Angeles Unified not only for its ban on chocolate milk, but also for the massive overhaul of its menu, which now offers an array of ethnic options like whole-grain nan bread, noodles and fresh salads.

"There's not a single thing on the menu that resembles fast food -- no nuggets, no corn dogs, no pizza," she said.

School districts must continue their efforts toward devising healthy menus, she said, because new federal guidelines call for even stricter calorie counts and limits on salt, fat and sugar.

"School lunches in California aren't even close to the new federal guidelines," she said. "We still have a long way to go."