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Fast Food is King at Arroyo High

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Editorial Page

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IF YOU'RE a student at Arroyo High School in San Lorenzo, and you must have a Whopper, french fries and a Coke for lunch, you won't have to go far to satisfy your fast-food cravings.

That's because there's a Burger King right on campus, just outside the door to the school cafeteria, staffed by student workers dressed in neat red uniforms and caps. The franchise holder? The school district itself. Even the garbage cans carry the Burger King logo.

Each day hundreds of students in this community tucked between San Leandro and Hayward rush to the order windows to satisfy their fast-food fix.

"I don't think it's healthy, but I eat it because it tastes good," ninth-grader Chris Cook said as he clutched his lunch in a brown Burger King bag. As one student muscled her way through the crowd on her way off campus, she berated her fellow students. "This food is so bad for you," she proclaimed. Everyone ignored her as they pressed toward the Burger King window dispensing Chicken Tenders, "Chick 'n Crisp" sandwiches, Hershey's Sundae Pie and other familiar fast-food items. Right next to the Burger King is a door leading to the school's "Healthy Express" counter, where students can buy salads and fresh sandwiches. Of the two, Burger King is winning, hands down. In a recent visit, not a single student lined up at the "Healthy Express" counter.

We sympathize with the plight of school officials trying to accommodate the tastes of picky students. But no district should be peddling food that could contribute to the crisis of obesity afflicting young people in California and the nation.

Schools should be educating young people about healthy lifestyles and diets - not pandering to tastes cultivated by sophisticated marketing, busy parents and adolescents who don't understand or don't care about the long-term consequences of their decisions.

"Burger King has, in effect, bought the school's implicit approval of its product," says Allan Kanner, a Berkeley psychologist and author of the forthcoming "Psychology and Consumer Culture," to be published by the American Psychological Association this fall.

"It sends a message to children about what schools think is OK for them to be eating, and undercuts the message it should be sending about good health and good eating."

Some of the state's largest school districts, including Oakland, San Francisco and Los Angeles, are moving in the opposite direction. And in a huge victory for anti-junk food forces, just this week New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein announced that beginning this fall vending machines in 1, 200 public schools will no longer sell soda and other favorites like chewing gum, candy corn and licorice. Fat, sugar and salt will be trimmed from the 800, 000 lunches and breakfasts served in its school cafeterias.

"Everyone acknowledged we can't continue to have this flood of junk foods, processed food in our schools," the district's director of nutrition services explained.

But at Arroyo High, principal Richard Lloyd says the campus-based Burger King is a win-win situation. "It's been a great money-generator for the district, the service is quick and reliable, the kids like it, and for some it's their major meal of the day," he said.

When he came to the school as a journalism teacher two decades ago, all he heard were the usual complaints from students about inedible cafeteria food. These days, he hears little whining, which he takes as a sign that they're happier eaters.

But are they healthier? Not if the statistics on overweight and obese children are anything to go by, and the alarms sounded by the U.S. surgeon general and the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The adults who run the food program at Arroyo High concede that Burger King may not offer the healthiest fare. They point out that the school is encircled by every imaginable fast-food outlet, from McDonald's and Wendy's to Jack in the Box and Casper's Hot Dogs. They say having a Burger King on campus helps keep kids on campus - and leaves open the possibility that the students might be tempted by healthier items at the "Healthy Express" counter.

Child nutrition director Jo Ann Smith says the district enhanced the Burger King menu by offering a "veggie burger combo." And as long as students don't overindulge their fast-food habit, she says, the health effects are likely to be minimal. "If all the kids ate were hamburgers with extra cheese and mayonnaise and a double of order of fries

every day of the week, that wouldn't be good," she said. "But moderation is OK. We are trying to meet all their needs."

But the strategy has yet to pay off for students like Cameron Camacho, a ninth-grader, who says he's never ventured through the "Healthy Express" door, even though it's just yards from the Burger King. The days he doesn't eat a Burger King lunch, he opts instead for a candy bar washed down by a soda. So much for "moderation."

For the more nutritious offerings, a mere 50 kids - out of a student body of 1,800 - buy fresh sandwiches, and only 25 buy the salads. Even fewer have dared to try the veggie burger. And if Arroyo High really wants its kids to buy healthier foods, it is further undercutting its efforts by also running two snack bars near the Burger King, crammed with favorites like nachos with cheese sauce, pretzels and Doritos chips. The healthier offerings seem lost amid the piles of food with minimal nutritional value.

The presence of Burger King at schools like Arroyo High and its sister school San Lorenzo High makes them distinctive enough to attract attention from reporters as far afield as Japan. But in most other respects its food operations are similar to thousands of other schools in California.

Schools shouldn't be the place where kids can indulge their fast-food and sugar addictions without limits. Nor should companies with products of dubious nutritional value be allowed to market them to captive, and vulnerable, consumers. While at school, it's kids' minds that should be growing, not their waistlines.

What you can do

-- Support SB677, which will limit the sales of soda on school campuses. The bill was recently approved in the state Senate. It now must be approved by the Assembly Health Committee, which will hear it July 1.

-- Contact committee members and urge them to support it. E-mail:
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assemblymember.frommer@assembly.ca.gov

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-- Find out what your child is eating and encourage
your child's school to eliminate unhealthy offerings
on campus.

-- Contact your school district's nutrition services director to find out how many foods of "minimal nutritional value" are available on campus - and who is benefiting from those sales.