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Soda Ban Prompts Some Schools to Create Healthier Menu Choices

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RICHMOND, Calif. - Banning soda in schools is so passé. At many West Contra Costa campuses, they've banned Hostess.

That's right. No more Twinkies. No more Ding Dongs. No more Snow Balls.

And that's not all.

In an effort to curb rising obesity in children and get ahead of expected government mandates on the healthfulness of school lunches, the West Contra Costa school district has rid many of its middle school cafeterias of candy, soda and those ubiquitous slices of greasy Red Baron pizza.

Gone are the bags of Ruffles, cans of Coke and vendor-made bean and cheese burritos.

"We eliminated all the branded foods," said Heidi Camorongan, director of food services for the West Contra Costa school district.

"We want to change their habits," she said. "And it's hard. But it's the right thing to do for our students, especially in light of the studies that show how obesity is spreading."

Indeed, 40 percent of California's children are physically unfit, and more than 25 percent are overweight, according to the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

Nationwide, the American Obesity Association says about 30 percent of children ages 6 to 19 are overweight and 15 percent are obese.

Many East Bay school districts are dumping sodas, just ahead of a state law that does the same headed to the governor's desk, to combat the problem.

But in West Contra Costa, three middle schools signed on to a healthy meals pilot program, following the lead of Oakland and San Francisco schools, and are voluntarily stripping their shelves of carbonated drinks and fat-filled snacks.

"I want healthy food for the kids," said Pinole Middle School Principal Vera Rowsey, who also worked with student groups to make sure fund-raising food sales offer healthy snacks rather than the usual candy bars.

"The teachers had noticed the kids were just hyper in the afternoon classes after lunch."

Ridding schools of candy and soda is a step toward healthier and less sugar-charged students, but the biggest changes are originating inside the West Contra Costa school district's Nutrition Center.

In this mauve hulk of a building in downtown Richmond, a school district nutritionist has worked with cooks to cut the fat in the most kid-friendly meals.

Take that pizza. Rather than rely on Red Baron or Round Table to stock school ovens with cheesy slices laced with pepperoni, the school district has concocted its own recipe.

This lets district cooks tweak the amount of sodium and fat in their pizza, making the personal pies healthier while maintaining the taste.

The same tactic is being used in other foods, such as the beef and bean burrito and double cheeseburger.

Claire Scott, a 12-year-old student at Pinole Middle, gave the lower-fat recipes a thumbs up.

"It's good," said Claire, who munched on a school-made cheese pizza earlier this week. "I can tell it's homemade. It's much better than the nasty pizzas from last year."

Although some schools have received the new pizza recipe, it is still being implemented in other West Contra Costa schools.

Casey Saeliew, a 13-year-old at Helms Middle School, was also impressed with the school's new menu. "It's healthier than before," said Casey, who chose a Chinese chicken salad and bottle of water for lunch this week.

Harold Goldstein, executive director of the Davis-based California Center for Public Health Advocacy, said the idea that kids only want to eat fried and fatty foods is wrong.

"The premise that the only things kids want to eat are high in fat or high in calories is just not true," he said. "They want something that tastes good and is good for them."

Cooking food in-house is a step toward that goal, he added.

"That they're making their own food is great," Goldstein said. "What that means is they can decide what the portion size is."

Less worthwhile, Goldstein noted, are recent moves by schools, including Concord High and campuses in West Contra Costa and Pittsburg school districts, to ban soda while continuing to sell fizzless drinks that offer little or no nutritional value.

"When (soda is replaced with) Hawaiian Punch and Fruitworks and Gatorade, that's going to teach students a message that these beverages are better than (soda), and they're not really that much better at all," Goldstein said.

The "no on soda" message has taken hold in the state legislature, too, where senators this week approved a bill to rid the state's elementary schools of the carbonated drinks.

The bill, by Sen. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, restricts elementary school drink sales to milk, juice or water. If Gov. Davis signs the legislation, middle and high school students would see limited amounts of the fizzy products as well.

Even more stringent school lunch regulations are on the horizon.

A new law passed in 2001 and set to take effect in January would require all elementary school meals and snacks to contain no more than 35 percent calories from fat, and be no more than 35 percent sugar by weight. Fruit drinks would be required to contain at least 50 percent juice.

Implementation of the legislation, by Sen. Martha Escutia, D-Norwalk, may be delayed if funding is not approved.

Either way, West Contra Costa food director Camorongan is ready.

"My team made up our mind that we will not let the government tell us what we have to do," she said.

We will be ahead of the curve. And we feel that if we slowly introduce healthier foods as a pilot and show that we are successful, it will work."