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**New York City Schools Cut Down on Fat and
Sweets in Menus**

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Acknowledging that obesity is epidemic among New York City schoolchildren, the Education Department is reducing the fat content in the 800,000 meals it serves daily and banning candy, soda and other sugary snacks from school vending machines.

Gone may be lunchroom staples like beef ravioli, potato salad and macaroni and cheese; the department has so far failed in trying to reformulate these foods with healthier ingredients. Favorites like chicken nuggets, cheese pizza and Jamaican beef patties will remain on the menu, but in smaller portions or in a leaner (read: less finger-licking) form.

While federal guidelines recommend that only 30 percent of school-lunch calories come from fat over a five-day period, New York City intends to abide by the 30 percent rule for each meal by 2008. The changes will begin this September.

The new standards, announced at a City Council hearing yesterday, come out of a task force that Chancellor Joel I. Klein appointed in February. Martin Oestreicher, chief executive of the Office of School Support Services, said the new standards presented "aggressive yet balanced and realistic strategies for achieving our goal to support the health and academic preparedness of our schoolchildren."

School districts nationwide have been re-evaluating the meals they serve and cutting back on junk food in cafeterias. New York's attempts to upgrade its nutrition standards will be closely watched: the school system is the nation's largest, and it says it serves more meals daily than any government entity but the Department of Defense.

A recent study showed that, according to the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 20 percent of third graders and 21 percent of sixth graders in New York City are obese. In poor neighborhoods like the South Bronx, East Harlem

and Bushwick, Brooklyn, almost 15 percent of the population has diabetes, often caused by poor diet and lack of exercise.

Vending machines have become common, especially in high schools, because they are a lucrative revenue source for financially struggling schools, which use the money for sports and other programs. Education officials say that by providing an alternative to traditional meals on trays, the vending machines also encourage teenagers to stay on school grounds during the lunch hour.

But many schools contract with vending companies on their own, with no central oversight or nutritional requirements.

City Council members said yesterday that the new standards did not go far enough and that they would pass legislation requiring even stricter rules. For example, the Council bill would sharply limit the amount of sodium and trans fatty acids in school food.

Council members said that a city law would make dietary rules permanent, while the new guidelines that Mr. Klein is putting in effect could be scrapped by his successors.

"There is a history of decrees from the chancellor's office not necessarily being followed throughout the system," said Councilman David Yassky of Brooklyn, one of the bill's sponsors.

But Mr. Oestreicher and Dr. Roger Platt, a Health Department official who oversees school health, told members of the Council's education and health committees that the bill was unnecessary. The new rules will be impossible to violate, they said, because only one vending company will provide machines and food for them. The machine foods will come from a list approved by Mr. Klein's office, which they said would not include candy, soda or juice made up of less than 100 percent fruit. Some kinds of cookies and potato chips could still make the cut, they said.

To ensure that each meal contains no more than 30 percent fat, schools will use more whole-wheat bread instead of the current 60 percent white, 40 percent wheat blend; reduce the use of canned vegetables and offer fresh and frozen vegetables five days a week instead of the current three; serve more fish and foods like fake chicken and burgers that are made of soy protein; and decrease the number of mayonnaise-based salads offered daily to one from three.

In addition, schools will make cookies and other snacks smaller, reduce the use of highly processed foods like chicken patties, and limit beverages to water, milk and juice made of 100 percent fruit.

In one example of reformulated food, teriyaki chicken, which now has 566 milligrams of sodium per serving and gets 54.2 percent of its calories from trans fat, will become chicken breast with teriyaki sauce, with 299 milligrams of sodium and 11.5

percent of its calories from trans fat. Trans fat typically comes from hydrogenated vegetable oil.

The new version will, however, have more cholesterol. A new version of Jamaican beef patties, while much lower in fat, will include considerably more sodium. "The sodium gets a little taste back into it," Mr. Oestreicher said, adding that "it's still within our standards."

New York's new nutritional standards come as Congress prepares to renew the \$10 billion federal school lunch program, which expires next year. While school lunches have generally become healthier over the last decade, many are still high in fat. And for children of all ages, vending machines have become an increasingly popular alternative to traditional school lunch offerings.

Currently, federal rules prohibit the sale of soda and other "minimally nutritious" foods only in school cafeterias, and allow their sale only after meal hours.

Eva S. Moskowitz of Manhattan, chairwoman of the City Council education committee, described the smell of school lunchrooms as nauseating and questioned whether students would eat the healthier food. She scoffed at Mr. Oestreicher's claim that teaching good eating habits would convert children into vegetable zealots or stop the widespread habit of hurling picked-at school lunches into the nearest trash can.

"It's got to be more complicated than that," she said.