

San Francisco Chronicle

Junk food a cash cow for schools

C.W. Nevius

Tuesday, May 17, 2005

Is it time to kill the cheese zombie?

That's the recommendation of well-meaning lawmakers in California. Concerned about the epidemic of obesity among school children, they have backed legislation to boot junk food off school campuses. The "zombie," a cheese-filled bread snack that has been popular at some East Bay schools for years, might be considered for extinction.

Sounds like a great idea, doesn't it? And it is, except for one problem.

It doesn't work. At least so far.

The dirty little secret of school lunches is that all that awful stuff --

the cookies, burgers, potato chips, pizza and soda pop -- is paying the freight for those healthy school lunches we all say we want.

Kathleen Corrigan, who has been food services director for the sprawling Mount Diablo School District in Contra Costa County for 20 years, knows that students in her cafeterias are making a lunch of a Coke, a slice of pizza and two cookies.

"Yeah, and I hate it," she says. "In an ideal world, I would sell lunches only. But it is becoming harder and harder to make our budget. The fact is, the snacks are what keep our full meals reasonable."

Her district isn't the only one affected by the trend. In 2000, the Public Health Institute conducted a school-lunch survey of 345 California high schools and found that a la carte items such as pizza, hamburgers, submarine sandwiches, French fries, chips, cookies, yogurt, bagels, ice cream and sodas accounted for 70 percent of all food sales at 71 percent of school districts surveyed.

Amanda Purcell, who conducted the survey, said last week that she doubted there would be much difference today.

"In high schools, a la carte is the bulk of the sales," Purcell says. "I don't think we have seen a significant change in how food service does business. They feel they need to sell those high-fat, junky things to keep the meals afloat."

Mount Diablo's Corrigan is trying to find solutions to the problem, but Purcell says others are just looking at the bottom line.

"Quite frankly, there are a lot of people who would continue to do business as usual," she says. "It is not hard to sell candy to children."

Not that there aren't some hopeful signs. A survey released last month by the UC Berkeley Center of Weight and Health said kids tended to switch to better food sources when junk food was eliminated -- to the point that food service revenues actually increased.

That's great. But others point out that students at many high schools can leave campus for lunch or have many more options for what they can bring from home. Also, the majority of the 16 California schools in the Cal survey had large numbers of students who qualified for higher

reimbursement rates for lunches. Without a closed campus, or extra reimbursement, the task is very difficult.

Consider, in the last two years, Corrigan has made some healthy revisions in the snack menu. She changed to low-fat potato chips and "eliminated some ice cream items we just couldn't justify."

The result?

"Our income for a la carte items dropped \$140,000," Corrigan says.

Innovative methods have to be employed. A shining example is Al Schieder, food services director for the Folsom Cordova Unified School District. Schieder, a former restaurateur, first researched his market.

"He actually spent time following the kids around to see what they were eating," says Peggy Agron, director of Project LEAN at the Public Health Institute. "He sells pizza and sandwiches, but they make the bread themselves. The district was losing \$200,000 a year selling 125 entrees a day. Now they sell 800 a day and have a \$400,000 reserve."

The keys, everyone agrees, are pretty simple.

"They want something affordable that they don't have to wait 10 hours to get," says Purcell. "They will eat that."

But for God's sake, don't tell them what you are doing.

"We had a school that said, 'We're going to do Healthy Thursday to announce our new menu.' And we said, 'Don't do that. No one will come to school on Thursday. Just do it and don't say anything.' "

Agron says a food-service director in San Diego gradually replaced the soft drinks in campus vending machines with water bottles. She slowly increased the mix until the pop vanished and no one seemed to notice.

That's a nice story, but what seems more likely is that our appetite for snack food is deeply rooted in our taste buds. Take the cheese zombie, which Corrigan says has been a specialty in the Mount Diablo district for years.

"We have people who graduated years ago calling to get the recipe," she says.

Better face it. It isn't easy to kill a zombie.

C.W. Nevius' column appears Tuesdays and Saturdays in the Bay Area section and on Fridays in East Bay Life. E-mail him at cwnevus@sfnchronicle.com