

## West Contra Costa schools hope diet programs bear fruit

Kids not eating healthful foods despite changes to cafeteria offerings

By Jessica Meyers  
STAFF WRITER

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A trail of discarded pears littered the cafeteria floor at Washington Elementary School in Richmond during a recent lunch hour. Above the smashed fruit, a group of sixth-grade boys vied for a bag of mini chocolate-chip cookies.

The pears are part of an effort by West Contra Costa Unified to follow the federally mandated wellness policy it implemented last year and a state nutrition law enacted this summer. But government initiatives alone won't do the trick so schools are looking to families to help get the message across. Unless students learn proper eating habits at home, some parents and administrators worry, Fritos will dominate lunchboxes, and fruit will remain on the floor.

Such fears prompted Washington Elementary's PTA to try to bridge the gap between government efforts and parental responsibility to keep kids healthy. This month, Washington received \$500 from the national PTA for its proposal to promote wellness through a series of family meals and theater. The school was one of 40 throughout the country recognized by the national organization.

"It's really a parental obligation to ensure your child is having healthy options," said Washington PTA President Alana Conner, who is helping plan a healthy family breakfast in the spring as part of the award.

The grant application also proposed recipes in the PTA newsletter and a theater performance focusing on nutrition.

"A school doesn't have to feed (children) breakfast, dinner or on the weekends," Conner said. "If you help your child with the ability to make healthy choices, they won't trade that fruit for a cupcake."

National PTA spokesman James Martinez said the organization has turned its attention to child health in the past few years with the growing concern over rising childhood obesity rates. But local PTAs have gotten even more involved in the school nutrition discussion with the enactment of California's food standards law in July. The law limits what a school can sell during school hours beyond its meal program. It covers everything from items in vending machines to brownies sold at the

PTA bake sale. Even birthday cake has become a source of tension.

"It's called the cupcake war right now," said Patricia Crawford, co-director for the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley.

A cupcake at a birthday doesn't seem like a big deal and the pinata brought from home full of candy is fine for a special occasion, until it's multiplied by 20 students, Crawford said.

"If schools and parents don't work together, they can undermine each other," Crawford said. "Healthy foods for every celebration, some parents really go against that. But it works best when they are in sync, when parents can help support the changes made at schools."

That's the goal for Olivia Ho, WCCUSD's nutritionist, who said many parents don't even know the district has a wellness policy. Under a 2004 federal nutrition law, districts had to implement a program that targeted health by the start of the 2006 school year. West Contra Costa chose to follow the state's framework, which includes physical education, counseling services and health promotion for students and staff.

A year after the wellness policy kicked in, Ho said she's seeing an increase in parental involvement. Last year a handful of parents showed up to her October workshop on nutrition standards. This year, there wasn't an empty seat.

Ho hands out grocery lists for Costco, Safeway and Albertsons (now Lucky) with healthy and affordable food selections. She provides fundraising alternatives such as bowl-a-thons and selling foot warmers. She considers it a start, but said she still gets calls from confused parents who worry the new laws are going too far.

"Some people think we are going to ban pizza and the rumors get bigger and bigger. Now with trans fats they call and ask if we are going to ban bakery products," she said. "We need clarification."

Washington Elementary's PTA was one of the first to ask Ho for help in making sense of the nutrition babble. Last year, in coordination with the district, the school held an event where kindergartners could sample healthy food items.

San Pablo's Helms Middle School had a fitness and health festival in May. Riverside Elementary in San Pablo threw a summer food kick-off, all efforts to educate students and parents about the benefits of healthy eating.

These events actually have had an effect, said Riverside Elementary Principal Greg Santiago.

"There was a time when kids would bring giant bags of hot Cheetos, rip it open and call it lunch," he said. Now to complement the district's push, he has a "5-Cs" rule that bans large quantities of snack food.

"Cake, cupcakes, a couple of cookies, that's fine, but don't bring enough for the entire grade or class," Santiago said. "No candy allowed. And cola ... forget about it."

The students are responsive, Santiago said.

"They really assume a good responsibility in this manner. The kids and parents are absolutely fabulous."

Part of this cooperation comes from the need to confront an issue in a district where more than a third of its students are overweight. Parents now bring popcorn instead of cupcakes for birthday parties.

"It was the district waking up and us following suit," Santiago said.

Washington Elementary Vice Principal Lisa Levi said she's starting to see changes. The new community kitchen still smelled like fresh paint as Levi passed by on her way to lunchroom duty one recent day.

"I'm still seeing chips and soda," she said, surveying the cafeteria, where a girl was surrounded by a bag of Cheetos, a pastry and cookies wrapped in foil. "But there are more children bringing lunch from home. (Many have) yogurt and apple slices that mom cut up."

A few tables over, second-grader Leilani Gil, 7, nibbled strawberries. A neighbor reached over and took one, then a few more.

"(Mom) always packs watermelon or strawberries," she said, wiping a trickle of juice from the side of her mouth. "She only serves me healthy food, not junk food."

She paused thoughtfully in mid-munch and continued as she battled away another friend's eager hands.

"I like Cheetos a little bit better, but strawberries are good."