

“Why can’t we have better food in our schools?”

and other frequently asked questions about school food

Who decides what food is served in schools?

School cafeterias and “Beaneries” (the a la carte operations which are sometimes located outside of the cafeteria) are operated by Student Nutrition Services (SNS). Only middle schools and high schools have a la carte sales. The daily cafeteria breakfast and lunch served in the “regular” line (known as the “mainline”), and the menu at the Beaneries is provided by SNS. See below for information on food sold in vending machines.

Where does the food come from?

The meals served in all elementary schools, middle schools and high schools come from Preferred Meal Systems. This company specializes in providing nutritious frozen entrees, which are then completed by the addition of fresh breads, local fresh produce, and fresh milk. The hamburger and hot dog buns are fresh 100% whole wheat and come from Athens Baking Company in Fresno (CA); other whole grain breads served with the school meals come from Alpha Baking Co. in Chicago. Fresh produce comes from JC Produce in Sacramento (CA). The milk is from Berkeley Farms in Hayward (CA) and contains no bovine growth hormone (rBST.). The Preferred meals are delivered daily and heated to food safe temperatures for meal service at the schools. Other assorted food products necessary for the production of all a la carte sales items come from Sysco.

Why doesn’t SNS contract with more small local companies and farms for their food?

SNS is required to follow a bid process for awarding contracts to supply the food. Bids are solicited from interested companies; the bid is usually divided into sections (for example, produce is a separate section within the bid) and a company can bid on all of the sections or only on some of them. Each company must post a bid bond, to guarantee that they are earnest about their bid. Companies interested in being suppliers to the district must submit sealed bids by a certain date. When the sealed bids are opened, the contract must be awarded to the lowest bidder who has also met all of the various conditions set forth in the bid. This is how Sysco became the major supplier.

Why can’t schools do scratch cooking?

Twenty years ago, there was scratch cooking done in nearly every school. Over time, the increasing costs of labor and equipment led to the closure of more and more of the kitchen areas of school cafeterias, and a reliance on food which could be prepared at one site and then shipped to another site, where it is reheated and served. Elementary schools have not done onsite cooking since 1988. Most elementaries no longer even have a kitchen area, those rooms having long ago been taken over for other school needs, including class size reduction.

Can parents work to reopen a cooking kitchen at their school?

The idea of returning to scratch cooking is very appealing to some parents, but it is not feasible. Even in the few schools which still retain a “kitchen” space, there is no budget for renovation or the purchase of new equipment. While parents sometimes think that volunteer efforts, combined with creative grant writing, might produce the ability to renovate a school kitchen, they fail to consider the added cost of staffing a cooking kitchen, estimated to be well over \$100,000 per year for even the smallest schools, at current salary levels. Even with 100% of students eating the school meals, there would not be enough revenue generated to cover the cost of the food and the higher labor cost.

Is the food served at school healthy?

Yes! All food served in the “mainline” must meet USDA standards. Additionally, the SFUSD has created its own nutrition standards, which are even stricter, and which apply even in the a la carte lines (which the USDA does not currently regulate, although some state laws regulating this food went into effect in July 2007) as well as in the “mainline”. The SFUSD Wellness Policy stipulates that entrees cannot derive more than 30% of their calories from fat, nor more than 10% of their calories from saturated fat. Food can be no more than 35% sugar by weight. These limits apply to every meal, not to an “average” of all meals served over the course of a week. Milk contains no bovine growth hormone. Snacks must also meet certain minimum levels for a variety of nutrients. In short – no empty calories!

But don't school cafeterias sell a lot of junk food?

Not in the SFUSD. In January 2003, the SF Board Of Education passed a resolution calling for soda and junk food to be removed from all schools by the start of the 2003-04 school year. At the time, middle and high school cafeterias were selling not only soda but also sweetened ice tea, lemonade, fruit drinks made mostly of water and high fructose corn syrup, chips, french fries, fatty chicken wings and hot links, gigantic cheeseburgers and pizzas big enough for 2 people (but sold as a single portion), ice cream, snack cakes, and other high fat, high sugar, low nutrition items. By August 2003, all of those products had been replaced by fresh salads, deli sandwiches, soups, pasta, reasonable sized burgers, a slice of low fat pizza served with a side salad, baked potato, bagel and cream cheese, yogurt, frozen juice bars, and for beverages, water, milk, or 100% fruit juice. The menu change received nationwide attention, especially when it was demonstrated that, rather than losing money, the healthier food generated more money for Student Nutrition Services. In 2004, the district's nutrition policy won a Superintendent's Challenge Award from State Superintendent Jack O'Connell, and in 2006, a “Victory Against Hunger” Award from the Congressional Hunger Center in Washington D.C.

What about vending machines?

SNS does not operate any vending machines. Schools which have vending machines operate them on a contract between school personnel and the vending company. In some schools, it is the Principal who holds the contract, while in others, it might be the head of the PE department, or JROTC, or an academic department. Regardless, all vending

machines are supposed to carry only products on the district's approved list for vending (available at www.sfusdfood.org; scroll down to "Wellness Policy in Action"). All products on the approved list meet district standards for fat, sugar, and nutrients. Enforcement of the approved list is the responsibility of the school principal.

The vending machines at my school are full of products which are not on the approved list. What can I do?

Bring this to the attention of your Principal, and ask that the Principal work with the vendor to comply with the approved list. Some vendors claim that their products are "compliant", but what they mean is "compliant" with SB19, a state requirement which limits only sugar and fat content. Beginning in July 2007, vending machine products will also be regulated by state legislation SB12 and SB965. Under the terms of the SFUSD Wellness Policy, vending machines must be not only compliant with all of these regulations, but also meet district standards, which are higher than all of these regulations combined. That is why the district has developed their own list of what is acceptable, and vendors are expected to abide by that list. If bringing your complaint to the Principal is not effective, please contact the SFUSD student nutrition committee by using the feedback form at www.sfusdfood.org (scroll down to "Contact Us" and click on either link.)

Read about SB12

<http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/PDFs/SB12Summary.pdf>

Read about SB965

<http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/PDFs/SB965Summary.pdf>

It seems like the kids don't like the food, even if it is healthy.

It is sad but true that far too many students are so used to the high sodium, high sugar, high fat taste of fast food and junk food, that food which derives no more than 30% of its calories from fat, and no more than 35% sugar by weight, just does not appeal to them. When asked what kind of food they would like to have available in the cafeteria, far too many students list all of the items which were removed in 2003 – soda, chips, french fries, fast food. At one high school, of 123 students who responded to the question "What kind of food would you like to have in the caf for lunch?", 26 (or 21%) listed soda and junk food as their top preference. When these students ask, "Why can't we have better food?" they are asking for a return to the kind of food which has been linked to higher rates of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and other related disorders. Many medical studies show that low income students of color are most likely to be affected by these ailments. While it is not possible for school cafeterias alone to reverse the skyrocketing rates of obesity and related diseases, there is no reason why they have to be contributors either.

So are you saying that there is no way to make the food more appealing to the kids?

Not at all! A salad bar was piloted at 3 schools in Spring 2007, and was so successful that the Mayor's office and the Department of Children, Youth, and their Families gave SNS money to open salad bars in 25 schools during the 2007-08 school year. The salad bars offer a variety of fresh greens and raw vegetables such as baby carrots, broccoli,

cauliflower, cherry tomatoes, and jicama, plus fresh fruit and whole grain bread and muffins, all available at no extra cost to students who eat the mainline meal. Assuming funding to allow the salad bars to continue to operate in 2008-09, there will be even more variety offered, including beans and corn, so that students who prefer a vegetarian diet may choose a more protein-rich salad along with the vegetarian entrée. Salad bars are the single most requested school food improvement from both students and parents, and school meal participation has increased dramatically at most schools with salad bars.

Starting in August 2008, all mainline meals coming from Preferred Meal Systems will be 100% trans fat free. Other improvements which have been planned (assuming necessary funding is found): Brown rice and whole wheat pasta will begin appearing in lunches. Elementary schools which do not have a salad bar will be offering a wider variety of raw vegetables with lunches (not just baby carrots.) Also beginning in August 2008, elementary schools will be offering a hot breakfast daily. When the hot breakfast was piloted at 10 schools during the 2007-08 school year, breakfast participation nearly tripled. With skyrocketing food and fuel costs in 2008, all of these improvements will demand that more money be found for school meal programs.

Other improvements, like organic produce, or higher quality entrees at the elementary schools, are also possible IF increased funding is found. The food currently being served is the healthiest and most appealing available, given price constraints. For more information on the cost of providing school meals, please visit www.sfusdfood.org and click on "A short history of school food in the SFUSD".

How can more funding be found?

The district's student nutrition committee is always looking for grants to supplement SNS revenue and fund pilot projects. If you know of a grant which might be appropriate, please contact the committee through the feedback form at www.sfusdfood.org (scroll down to "Contact Us" and click on either link.) The long term solution is for Congress to fund school meal programs at a more realistic level. Rising costs for food, fuel, and labor will drive Student Nutrition Services' costs up about 35% in 2008-09, but the government reimbursement for free and reduced price meals will increase by only 4%. To learn how you can encourage Congress to provide more money for school meals, go to <http://www.pasasf.org/cna/index.html>

Why doesn't SNS just raise the price of breakfast and lunch to bring in more money?

Meal prices are going up in 2008-09, to \$1.50 for breakfast, and to \$2.50 for middle school lunch and \$3 for high school lunch (elementary school lunch remains unchanged at \$2.). However, the amount of additional revenue this increase will generate is limited, because most of the students eating school meals qualify for either free or reduced price meals. The federal and state governments reimburse the school district for meals served to these students, but the total reimbursement rate in 2008-09 is just \$2.78 for a lunch which must contain 2 oz. of protein, 3/8 cup fruit, 3/8 cup vegetables, a serving of grain

or bread, and 8 oz of milk. The federal reimbursement rate is the same for the 48 contiguous states, and does not take into account the higher cost of everything from food to labor in San Francisco. See Appendix for how each SNS dollar is spent.

Why are labor costs so high?

Because of the high cost of living in SF, cafeteria workers here are the highest paid in California, with entry-level workers earning \$16.28 an hour, while comparable workers around the state earn from \$8.00 - \$12.35. The average salary for an entry level school cafeteria worker in California is \$10.31 per hour. Unfortunately, although the federal government pays their own employees a differential if they live in high cost of living areas like San Francisco, they do not pay a higher reimbursement rate for meals served to qualifying students who live in high cost of living areas. Only Alaska and Hawaii receive a higher reimbursement rate, even though their cost of living is far lower than San Francisco's.

Can students have any say in what is served?

The students can have a great deal of input into what is sold in the a la carte operation at their school. Keeping in mind that soda and junk food are not options, students who are interested in changing the a la carte menu at their school should follow these steps:

- survey other students to find out what kind of HEALTHY options they would like to buy (for a sample survey, see Appendix)
- compile the results and create a summary
- find an adult sponsor at the school (a teacher or administrator interested in nutrition)
- have the sponsor contact the SFUSD student nutrition committee via the feedback form at www.sfusdfood.org, to schedule a time for students to present the results of the survey and their recommendations

Students with specific complaints about food served in their cafeteria can use the complaint form at www.sfusdfood.org; they should fill out all of the information requested, including the name of their school and the item about which they are complaining. Please give as much detail as possible (e.g. - Hot food served too cold; cold food served at room temp; food is too salty; food was burnt; etc.) Forms which make only general complaints "The food is bad – fix it!" do not provide enough specific information to be useful, and do not result in improvements.

Why can't there be vegan meals, more organic food, and only biodegradable materials used?

The answer to all of these is the same – there can be, just as soon as there is funding to pay for it. For example, there are biodegradable utensil packs available (straw, napkin, and spoon) but currently the cost is several cents higher than conventional packs. Every penny of increase in the cost of this item translates to about \$250 per day based on the current number of meals served. That is an extra \$45,000 per year for each penny of increase in the price of a biodegradable product over the cost of a conventional product,

which explains why, in the absence of additional funding, SNS cannot just switch to biodegradable products.

Vegan meals were offered occasionally during the 05-06 school year. They were very unpopular, even with students who normally requested a vegetarian meal, and so were discontinued. Most of the products on the market in this category are far more expensive than non-vegan choices, and exceed the amount of money which SNS can pay per meal.

Likewise, organic produce is more expensive than non-organic, and although the district nutrition policy specifies that organic be made available whenever possible, more money for produce would make organic a possibility more often. Some organic produce was served in 2006-07 and in 2007-08; whether this can be continued in 2008-09 depends on whether additional funding becomes available.

I know of a great vendor of healthy food for kids. How can I get his products into the school cafeterias?

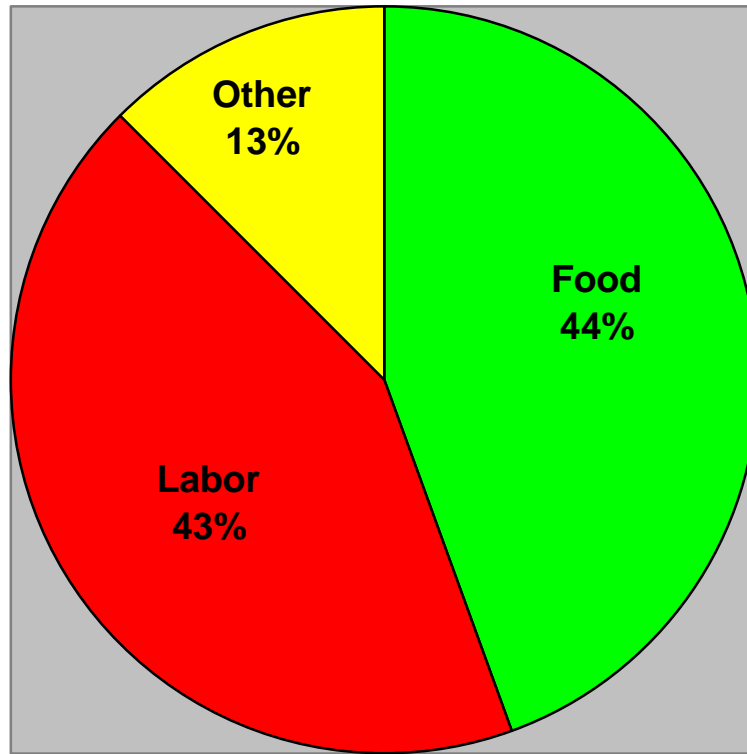
Child nutrition is subject to complex federal requirements. Determining whether specific products are suitable for the school meals program, and negotiating with vendors, are jobs best left to Student Nutrition Services. Have the company send their product information to:

Student Nutrition Services
841 Ellis Street
San Francisco, Ca 94109

Additional information on how individuals or groups can help support healthy food in the SFUSD is available here:

<http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/support.pdf>

APPENDIX



Student Nutrition Services Expenditure Budget 2008-09

“Other” includes gas, electricity, garbage collection, pest control, bank courier service, bank fees, delivery charges, copying and related office expenses, etc.

Food also includes kitchen supplies such as paper towels, tin foil, plastic wrap, cleaning products, etc.

Totals have been rounded

SAMPLE SURVEY FOR IMPROVING SCHOOL FOOD
(Name of School)

What grade are you in?

Do you get lunch at school?

If yes, do you eat the cafeteria lunch, or buy from the a la carte lines?

(For schools with a profit sharing line)

Do you buy from the profit sharing line?

What is your favorite lunch at school?

Where do you get it (cafeteria? Beanery? Profit sharing line? Other?)

Please suggest three healthy lunch choices you would like to see served at school.

How much would you be willing to pay for your favorite healthy lunch if it were offered?

Does your cafeteria or Beanery run out of food before you have a chance to get lunch?

Does an adult supervise the lunch line at your cafeteria? Is the supervision effective?

If you could change just one thing about school lunch, what would it be?

Some Things to Avoid

Don't ask students if they qualify for free or reduced lunch; this information is private, and it can be embarrassing for students to reveal their economic status.

The most useful surveys are impartial. You will get more creative ideas from students if you allow them to formulate and express their own opinions ("How would you improve your school lunch?"), rather than presenting them with prefabricated "opinions" and simply asking them to agree or disagree ("School food sucks" - check 'agree' or 'disagree'.) Being able to report that XX% of students agree that "school food sucks" does not move towards a solution; it merely makes the process adversarial. Being able to report that "students have offered the following suggestions for improving school food - add more fresh fruit; would like a salad; can we have organic fruit?; needs more food because I am not full even when I eat everything" identifies common complaints AND offers solutions. Get students to really think about how they would fix problems, not just agree with standard complaints.

The SFUSD Wellness Policy sets specific nutrient standards for food, and limits fat and sugar content. When asking students to suggest new lunch options, be sure to

specify that they need to suggest “healthy” options, not soda, candy, chips, fast food, or junk food.