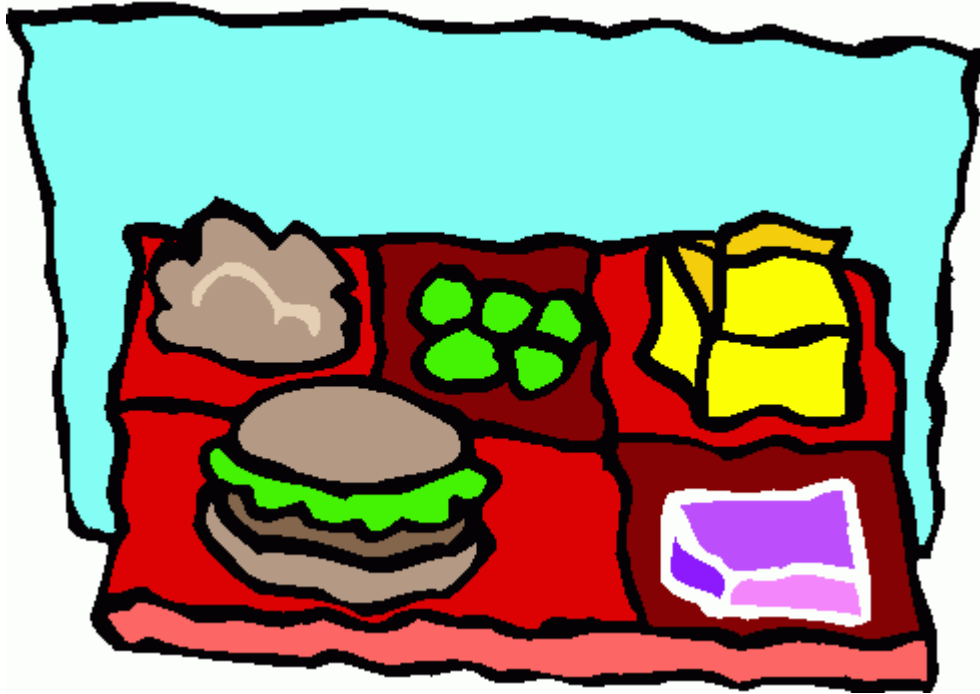


SCHOOL FOOD in the SFUSD A SHORT HISTORY



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School Food in the SFUSD – A Short History

Who's who – acronyms and revolting nicknames

School food in SF is handled through the department called Student Nutrition Services (SNS). At the K-5 level, cafeterias offer only the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) meal and the comparable breakfast (called SBP – school breakfast program.) Both of these federal programs are available to all students; those who qualify for free or reduced price meals (based on family income collected on the meal application form or through direct certification) get their meals for free, while other students may choose to pay \$1.50 for breakfast or \$2 for lunch (\$2.50 for middle school lunch, \$3 for high school). The meal served in the SBP and NSLP line is commonly referred to as “the mainline.”

For purposes of this discussion, I will be referring almost exclusively to “lunch”, as it is easier to focus on that one meal, but most schools do offer breakfast as well. Also, to save time, I may refer to “free lunch kids”, but this includes “reduced lunch kids” as well, because although the district is entitled to collect a 40 cent co-pay for lunch (30 cents for breakfast) from reduced kids, those students have traditionally also eaten for free in the SFUSD. One year, it was attempted to collect the co-pay from these students, with disastrous results, and the plan was abandoned, so once again reduced kids eat free. Finally, when I say “free lunch kids”, note that these kids also qualify for free breakfast. “Paying students” are non-low-income students who pay full price.

At the middle and high school level, there is a second food operation in the cafeteria, in addition to the mainline; this is an a la carte line, revoltingly called “The Beanery.” In the student nutrition world, all sales that compete with the mainline are called “competitive sales.” However, SNS runs the Beaneries, and Beanery profits go back to SNS to cover food and operating expenses. Beaneries offer older students a choice, apart from the mainline, or bringing a bag lunch from home. They sell sandwiches, salads, soups, 100% fruit juice, etc. More on these later.

How SNS works

SNS gets its money from two sources – cash payments made by paying students for mainline meals or for food which they buy at the Beanery, and government (state and federal) reimbursements for free and reduced price meals served to qualifying students. In 2008-09, the highest total reimbursement for a free lunch is \$2.78, for a free breakfast the highest total reimbursement is \$1.87. The federal government also gives a small reimbursement for mainline meals sold to paying students (about .26), although the state does not.

SNS has increased the price of the paid breakfast (to \$1.50 for all schools) and of paid lunch (to \$2.50 for middle school and \$3 for high school.) for 2008-09, due to rising costs for food and fuel, but it is still low compared to many other districts. (For example, in 2006-07, Berkeley was charging a paying student \$3.50 for lunch in middle school, and \$4 at high school, while SFUSD was charging \$2.)

In addition, it has long been the policy of the SFUSD that no student is allowed to go hungry. If a child shows up in the lunch line with no application on file for free or reduced meals, and no money to pay for his lunch, he is allowed to have the meal, and SNS absorbs the cost. The child is asked to please have his family fill out the lunch form, and may be handed a form on the spot, but parents cannot be forced to fill out the form, and some never will (often their concern is related to their immigration status.) SNS receives only the .24-.26 cent federal reimbursement for a paying meal to cover the cost of the meal for these non-paying students. Again, the district could do what other school districts do – either snatch the lunch tray away from the student and give him instead a “meal of shame” of a bowl of cereal, thereby not only humiliating him in front of his friends, but no doubt leaving him hungry as well, or even simply send him away hungry with no food at all. I am happy to say that the SFUSD does not practice either of these strategies, and instead concentrates on trying to get more families to fill out the meal application form.

The Aptos Pilot

When I began working on school food at San Francisco’s Aptos Middle School, our first concern was to clean up what was served in the Beaneries. In autumn 2002, there was not one single healthy thing sold in the Beanery; it was entirely soda, chips, snack cakes, and french fries; giant pizzas big enough for 2 or 3 students, but consumed most often by one; huge cheeseburgers the size of your head; chicken wings and hot links which derived 65% or more of their calories from fat, etc. During the Aptos pilot project begun in January 2003, we first eliminated the soda and other sugary drinks, replacing them with bottled water, 100% fruit juice, and milk. No iced tea, no Gatorade, no fruit “juice” which contained only 5% juice and the rest water and high fructose corn syrup. Next, we eliminated the chips; then the snack cakes, and finally redid the entrees. We consulted with the students and found that their most-requested item was deli sandwiches. SNS began providing roast beef, turkey, or turkey ham and cheese on a good quality French roll with lettuce and tomato. Other student requested items were salads and soups. Yogurt and frozen juice bars rounded out the menu. Before the junk food was eliminated, the Aptos cafeteria was running a deficit. Healthier food replaced junk in January 2003; by March, the cafeteria was breaking even, and by June, it finished the school year in the black, one of only two district cafeterias to do so.

The Wellness Policy

Meanwhile, in January 2003, the Board of Education passed a resolution mandating the removal of soda and junk food from all district cafeterias by the start of the 2003-04 school year, in response to soaring childhood obesity and related deadly disorders.

- Childhood obesity has tripled since 1970.
- Rates of asthma, heart disease, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and other disorders in children have skyrocketed correspondingly.
- Health professionals expect the current generation of children to be the first in modern history to live shorter life spans than their parents' generation, entirely because of obesity and related maladies.

-Obesity and related health crises are far more severe among African-American, Latino and economically disadvantaged children.

The resolution created the SFUSD student nutrition and physical activity committee, charged with developing a detailed plan to improve school food. Using the Aptos experience as a model, that committee produced the district's nutrition policy (now called the Wellness Policy, and available at www.sfusdfood.org). At the start of the 03-04 school year, as directed, all cafeterias opened with Beaneries stocked as the Aptos Beanery had been the year before – soda and junk out; water and juice, deli sandwiches, soup and salad in.

In addition, a set of nutrition standards were developed which were among the most stringent in the country, and which applied to all food sold or served in schools, and including vending machines and fundraising food sales. Fat and sugar limits were imposed on all food, and snacks and side dishes had to contain at least 5% of many other nutrients, including certain vitamins, minerals, and fiber (see the Wellness Policy for more details.) This ensured that SFUSD schools would sell “No Empty Calories.” Other districts, and even state law, allowed the sale, for example, of reduced fat potato chips, but our feeling was that reduced fat chips have less calories, but no additional nutrients, than regular chips. We were not interested in selling food which was simply “less bad” than before; we wanted out food to actually be “good” for kids (i.e. – more nutritious.)

Cafeteria food gets better

By the second year of the nutrition committee's operation, with the Beaneries' menu completely revamped, and junk food removed from the vending machines, we moved on to improving the meals served in the mainline. These meals already had to meet USDA standards for fat, sugar, and calorie content, but our own SFUSD standards are stricter. The USDA allows schools to average fat, sugar, and calorie content over the entire meal, and to average all meals served over an entire week. This means that a child might be offered a meal consisting of high fat chicken nuggets, a vegetable, a fruit, a roll, and milk. The nuggets might get 60% of their calories from fat, but when averaged with the fruit, the veg, the bread, and the milk, the percentage of calories from fat for the ENTIRE MEAL might fall into the acceptable zone below 30%. However, there is no way to ensure that the child will actually eat the other meal components; if he just eats the nuggets, takes a bite of the roll, and drinks the milk, leaving the fruit and veg on the tray , then he has consumed a very high fat meal indeed.

What is worse, a meal qualifies as “reimbursable” so long as the child selects just 3 of the 5 components offered, so he wouldn't even have to put the fruit or the vegetable on his tray! Same thing with averaging all meals over the course of the week – a higher-fat meal early in the week could theoretically be offset by a lower fat meal served later in the week, but again, there is no way to ensure that the child will eat both meals. If he consistently eats only the higher fat meals, then the USDA regulations, which are supposed to limit his fat intake from school food to 30% of calories, are not really working.

To combat this problem, the SFUSD standard applies the “no more than 30% calories from fat/10% from saturated fat” standard to every entrée (defined as what is on the plate with the protein, and usually including but limited to the vegetable or a typical size serving from the salad bar, if available.) By plating the vegetable with the entrée, we ensure that the child at least puts it onto his tray, which is the first step in getting him to eat it. By calculating the fat content of what is on that plate, and limiting it to 30%, we are ensuring that we are not serving kids an entrée high in fat offset by lower fat items which he may not select or eat. Typical SFUSD mainline lunches have only about 26% calories from fat, and about 8% from saturated fat, well below national average.

The old mainline menu used to read like the bill of fare at a carnival – corn dogs, french fries, pizza, quesadillas, cheeseburgers, chocolate cake, cookies. The new menu features home style meals parents might make for their own kids if they were cooking lunch at home – turkey and mashed potatoes, meatloaf, chicken and black bean burritos, mandarin chicken over rice, teriyaki rice bowl, spaghetti with meat sauce. Corn dogs and fried potatoes have been banished forever. Chicken nuggets are still served, but unlike the nuggets at fast food restaurants, these are made from whole pieces of breast meat, not “chopped and formed” dark meat. Other popular kid favorites like hot dog or hamburgers still appear, but once a month, not once a week as before, and whole wheat buns are used. Fresh fruit has replace pastries for dessert – students get an apple, not an apple turnover. There is an optional vegetarian choice (students should sign up for the vegetarian option in advance to ensure an adequate supply at their school site; contact your school Principal or cafeteria manager to find out how to do this at your school.)

The SNS deficit

In the bad old days of corn dogs and soda in schools, SNS ran a deficit of well over \$1 million per year. Our concern, when removing the lucrative junk food from the beaneries, was that the deficit might balloon even higher. Instead, we found just the opposite – the deficit shrank to about \$750,000 in the first year after removal of junk food, and to about \$415,000 in the second year. However, with the school district losing enrollment, and the consequent drop in money received from the state, SNS is under constant pressure to balance their budget, as every penny of that money is needed for other district expenses. The soaring costs of fuel and food, combined with higher costs for labor and benefits, is once again driving up the SNS deficit.

Competitive sales

Competitive sales have long been a financial drain on SNS. In the past, student groups sold candy, pizza, Chinese food (brought in from outside vendors and stored in the hallways until lunchtime sales), and all manner of other food at lunchtime, in direct competition with the cafeteria. By state code, student sales are supposed to be limited to 4 times per year, but that policy had not been well enforced by the district. When the Wellness Policy was written, it mandated compliance with that rule, and strictly limited all competitive sales, with most being allowed only well after school hours or on weekends. The purpose of limiting these competitive sales is to encourage students to eat in the cafeteria. When students spend their lunch money elsewhere, there is less money for SNS to spend improving the quality of the food for all students. Those who suffer for

it are the most vulnerable – the elementary students, whose only choice is cafeteria lunch or bag lunch from home, and the free lunch students, who can't afford the competitively-sold food and must eat the mainline lunch or go hungry. Schools, especially high schools, howled when they were made to stop selling competitively with the school meal program, as they had come to rely on that income, but most have adjusted over the past several years and do comply with the limits set on food fundraising.
(see <http://quartz.he.net/~beyondch/news/index.php?itemid=1051> and <http://quartz.he.net/~beyondch/news/index.php?itemid=394> for more on this subject)

SNS does not operate any vending machines. School vending machines may be sponsored by a school department, such as P.E. or JROTC, or by an academic department, or even by the school principal. Vending machine snacks and drinks are required to meet the district's nutrition standards.
(see <http://www.sfusdfood.org/approved.html> for more on this)

The demise of scratch cooking

There are those who have criticized the school food because it is not cooked from scratch, using locally grown fresh ingredients. While we agree that this would indeed be the ideal, the cost of such an enterprise in San Francisco would be ruinous. The district has no central kitchen; the cost to build one (even if a site were identified, which it has not been) was estimated at over \$20 million. Twenty years ago, there was scratch cooking done in nearly every school. During the 1980s, the federal government stopped providing money to maintain or replace aging cafeteria equipment. 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. Most recently, SNS has been purchasing meals from a provider who ships them to the sites frozen, and they are reheated just before being 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.
(see <http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/btfdfaq.pdf> for more on this)

The cost of labor vs food

School food funding is a zero sum game – if more is spent on labor, then less remains to pay for food, and vice versa. Currently, about 43% of every SNS dollar is budgeted for labor and benefits. Another 12.5% goes for gas and electricity, garbage removal, pest control, bank fees, couriers to take cash to the bank, the costs of running the office (copying, etc.), and other expenses. This leaves about 44.5% for food, or about \$1.24 (based on a total government reimbursement of \$2.78 for a free lunch) cents to pay for all five components of the mainline lunch. This is why school food is what it is – there is just not the money available for it to be of higher quality.

Addressing the deficit

SNS has taken several steps to try to increase revenue and reduce the deficit, while still providing meals to students who have no application on file and no money to pay. These “cash shortages” were over \$700,000 for the 2007-08 school year. To offset those losses,

SNS is trying to increase the rate of return of the meal applications. A campaign has been underway for several years to make more parents aware of the need to fill out the meal application, and to make school administrators more aware of how a high rate of return of meal applications can benefit their school.

(see <http://www.sfusdfood.org/pdfs/MeApFAQ.pdf> for more on this)

SNS is working to increase participation in the breakfast program, as another means of generating more revenue. A Grab n Go breakfast has been started at Balboa High School, which allows students to pick up a bagged meal in the cafeteria and take it right into the classroom to eat during the first ten minutes of school. This program was able to triple breakfast participation, and has been expanded to several other schools. SNS piloted a hot breakfast at 10 elementary schools in 2007-08, and participation on average tripled, with some schools showing increases of 400-500%. It has been proposed that in 2008-09, the hot breakfast be offered in all school breakfast programs, with cold cereal still available for those who prefer it.

SNS has begun the process of purchasing of a Point of Sale swipe card system, which students will use when paying for their meals. The card is encoded with the student's meal status (free/reduced/paid) and, for paid students, the card acts as a debit card, subtracting money to pay for the meal from an online account set up by parents. This system completely eliminates the stigma some students feel standing in the "free" lunch line, as no one would pay with cash. It will eventually allow free lunch kids to choose a reimbursable meal from the a la carte line and use their meal card to "pay" for it, completely eliminating the barrier between "free kids" who go to the mainline, and presumably higher-income kids who go to the a la carte line. The system will also save SNS money by eliminating cash handling, including the many fees associated with it (courier service to take cash to the bank, excess deposit charges levied by banks, manual recordkeeping by employees, etc.)

Enter the catering trucks

SNS has successfully removed soda and junk food from the cafeterias. The quality of the mainline meals has been improved, with carnival food out and home style meals, fruit instead of pastry, whole wheat bread, mashed or roasted (instead of fried) potatoes, and more Asian and Mexican entrees in. More kids are eating in the caf, due to the removal of the tempting junk food from the Beaneries, and reining in of the competitive sales by students in the hallways. But lo and behold, just as SNS was really starting to make headway against the remaining deficit, with the hope that once in the black, the department could move up to an even higher quality of food in the mainline, the catering trucks arrived. Like vultures, these behemoths (often stocked with every single item which had just been banned from the schools) arrived at the door of Galileo, Lincoln, Mission, John O'Connell, and Balboa High Schools, among others, luring students back to the soft drinks, junk food, and high fat entrees no longer available inside the school building. These vendors are not concerned with students' health, nor with the need of SNS to run in the black so as to be able to provide higher-quality meals to children -- but those of us on the district nutrition committee are. We don't believe that the "right" of these vendors to sell unhealthy food to children supersedes the "right" of parents to limit

their kids' access to unhealthy food, or the "right" of younger, poorer students to be served better quality food in their school meal program, a program which relies in part for income on the very students being lured out the door to buy soda and chips from a truck.

In March 2007, at the request of the SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee, the SF Board of Supervisors approved an ordinance which requires catering trucks to keep 1500 feet from the perimeter of all public middle and high schools; the Mayor signed the legislation at the end of March 2007, and it took effect at the end of April 2007, giving the police department 30 days to contact any catering truck owners currently operating on a route which brings them within 1500 feet of a school, and inform them that such stops are no longer permitted. At the same time, the San Francisco Board of Education has amended the district's Wellness Policy to include a requirement that, should a vendor show up within 1500 feet of school, the Principals contact their superiors, who are required to take action, including calling the police, to make the trucks abide by the city ordinance.

Requiring the trucks to park at least 1500 feet from the perimeter of all high schools puts them out of sight and, one hopes, out of mind for most students. So long as there are "open campuses", there will be kids who will go out to lunch and make unhealthy choices, but is it asking too much that they at least have to get some exercise and walk a few blocks before being able to load up on empty calories? Is it really necessary that the junk food be delivered right to the front door of the school?

Read what the media is saying about school food in the SFUSD:

<http://www.sfusdfood.org/archive.html>

Learn what you can do to help support healthy food in the SFUSD:

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

About the author

Dana Woldow was appointed to the SFUSD student nutrition and physical activity committee when it was first formed in spring 2003, and has served as co-chair since autumn 2003. She is a parent with three children who have gone through the SFUSD schools from kindergarten through high school. She is not employed by the school district and all of the work she does on behalf of student nutrition is performed as a volunteer. Contact her at Nestwife@owlbaby.com.

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