

A Beginner's Guide to the New SFUSD Nutrition Standards

Why does the SFUSD have a new nutrition standard?

In January 2003, the Board of Education passed a resolution calling for the removal of junk food and soda from the schools, beginning with the 2003-04 school year. A committee of parents, students, health professionals, and district staff put together the new policy.

What is junk food?

Junk food is food which is high in calories, but low in nutritional value. The opposite of junk food is nutrient-dense food, which has a high proportion of nutrients relative to the calories it contains. The new SFUSD policy can best be described as “No empty calories!”

What are the new standards?

The new standards set maximum allowable levels for fat and sugar content in foods and beverages, and also set minimum standards for 8 essential nutrients. Allowable foods can have no more than 30% of their calories from fat, no more than 10% from saturated fat, and contain not more than 35% sugar by weight. Snacks and side dishes should contain at least 5% of the RDI for 8 essential nutrients (protein, iron, calcium, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, thiamin, niacin, and riboflavin.) There are also limits set on portion size.

That sounds pretty strict. Are there really snacks which meet such high standards?

Not as many as we would like. The “8 essential nutrients” standard is our ultimate goal, but it may take food manufacturers some time to achieve that goal. That is why the district's policy also states that exceptions can be made for products which are lacking in some nutrients if they are unusually high in many other nutrients. This allows a wider range of products to be sold, while awaiting the food industry's expected response, which is to improve the nutritional content of their products. This has already started to happen (Kraft foods, for example, is reducing portion size and fat content of many of their products in response to consumer demand.)

How does this “exception to the rule” policy work in practice? Does it mean the schools can sell baked chips or high-calories cookies if they contain 5% of a few of the essential nutrients?

No. Baked chips, while containing fewer calories than regular fried chips, contain no additional nutrients, so the calories are still “empty”. Baked Lay's Potato Crisps contain no Vitamin A, only 2% of the RDI for Vitamin C, iron, and riboflavin, and only 4% of the RDI for calcium and protein. While they contain about 8% of the RDI for niacin and 16% for thiamin, chips are so lacking in the other 6 essential nutrients that they cannot be considered a nutrient-dense food.

The “exception to the rule” policy is intended to apply to a product like, for example, Quaker Oatmeal Breakfast Squares. This product contains no Vitamin C, but it has 8% of the RDI for protein, and 20% of the RDI for Vitamin A, calcium, iron, thiamin, niacin,

and riboflavin. By any standard, this is a “nutrient-dense” food, and so it would be allowed even though it contains no Vitamin C.

Are there any other “exceptions” to the policy?

Yes. Some products may be excluded from the approved list even though they meet or exceed the nutritional standards. For example, some new 100% juice or water products are billed as “energy boosters”. Even though the water or juice itself might meet the nutritional standards, these beverages contain added ingredients such as caffeine, guarana, and kava kava, which act as stimulants and can interact with asthma medication. Many of these products have abnormally high levels of Vitamin A (in some cases over 100% of the RDI per bottle) which can interact with Accutane, a commonly-prescribed acne treatment. These beverages, which do not carry any kind of warning label, are not appropriate for children or teenagers, and are not approved for sale in the SFUSD.

Another example is sunflower seeds in the shell. Although these meet the nutritional requirements for nuts and seeds, Principals have asked us not to allow them to be stocked in vending machines because students spit out the seeds and it creates a mess on school grounds. Some products that meet nutritional guidelines may be excluded because they are not available in a portion size that meets the policy specifications. Beverages that would otherwise be acceptable could be rejected because a Principal has requested no glass bottles on campus.

Why is 100% fruit juice allowed, even though it contains as much sugar as soda?

The focus of the district’s nutrition policy is not “low calorie”, but rather “no empty calories.” Although fruit juice does contain sugar, all of the sugar in juices approved for sale is “naturally-occurring” – that is, the sugar was contained in the fruit which yielded the juice; those juice drinks which also contain added sweetener and water are not allowed. Soda contains only empty calories, while 100% fruit juice contains nutrients beyond the calories themselves. Orange juice contains vitamins A and C, thiamin, niacin, riboflavin, protein, and may also be enriched with calcium; soda contains no nutrients other than its calories. Pure fruit juice is also healthier for kids because of what it does NOT contain – caffeine, phosphoric acid (which can leach calcium from bones), and artificial flavors and colors, all of which are common ingredients in soda.

How does the SFUSD’s policy differ from SB677 or SB19?

There are several ways in which the SFUSD policy differs from these two laws. Both SB677 and SB19 apply only to products sold in elementary and middle schools; the SFUSD policy extends to high schools as well.

SB677 allows the sale of fruit juice which contains only 50% juice; the SFUSD requires fruit juice to be 100% juice. SB677 allows the sale of electrolyte replacement drinks (like Gatorade); the SFUSD policy does not allow these beverages, because they contain added sweeteners.

Finally, although both SB19 and SB677 set maximum standards for fat and sugar content, neither addresses the issue of “empty calories” by requiring minimum levels of essential nutrients. The SFUSD policy is groundbreaking in this respect, and guarantees

that food offered for sale to students meets the highest nutritional standards in the country.