

How can you help support healthy food in the SFUSD?

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Activists who want to ensure that San Francisco schoolchildren get wholesome, nutritious school food need to unite with one voice: It's time to tell the city of San Francisco and our generous philanthropic community that they must step up and support high-quality meals for our community's children.

The bare-bones government funding for school meals means that our district is allotted 97 cents per meal to feed each child – 47 cents for the entree. No matter what efficiencies managers impose or what corners they cut, children cannot be fed decently on that meager amount.

That's why our sophisticated, compassionate community must share the responsibility.

School meals need to be supported with permanent funding that doesn't encroach on educational necessities. Mayor Gavin Newsom has already provided funds to open salad bars in a group of schools, and the city's Department of Children, Youth, and Families has supported the Grab n Go breakfast program at Balboa High School with a grant to pay for a Point of Sale swipe card system to move hundreds of students through the front door where they can pick up a breakfast to take to class.

But the district's Student Nutrition Services department does not have the manpower to seek out or apply for grants. The volunteers who are doing this work need backup and support.

Bringing the community to the table will be the most important step since the San Francisco Board of Education voted in 2003 to create a healthy food policy, at a time when it was almost unheard-of to question soda and junk food sales in schools.

That policy established the Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee, which revamped a la carte school food sales and worked to improve school meals. And things have improved – fresh fruit is served in place of mass-processed turnovers, all the bread is whole wheat, and real chicken replaced chopped, pressed “nuggets.” Corn dogs and tater tots, once staples, are a thing of the past.

Advocates who want to keep that momentum going can be most effective by working in cooperation with the existing SFUSD Nutrition Committee. Attend the meetings and get involved with the subcommittees. Reinventing the wheel or going in a contradictory direction, no matter how well-intentioned, wastes time and resources that could be going toward achieving real change.

To receive a notice of the next SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee meeting, send an e-mail to nestwife@owlbaby.com

Here are some other ways to help improve nutrition for our children:

- **Keep healthy school food a priority in San Francisco.** Make sure that the new Superintendent and the Board of Education keep student nutrition in the spotlight.

- **Work with the Student Nutrition Services Department, not against them.** Before advocating for a course of action (such as a return to scratch cooking in all schools, or implementation of Provision 2), network with the district's Student Nutrition Services, or with the Nutrition Committee, to learn about real-world circumstances. For example, only a few remaining San Francisco schools have working kitchens, and it would cost many millions of dollars to install them in every school – and vast amounts more to staff them in a city with the world's highest labor costs. That doesn't mean that more scratch cooking is out of the question, but it would only be possible if vastly more funding is made available to the department. To contact SNS, e-mail wilkinse@sfnusd.edu

- **Take it to the federal level.** Advocates could do a tremendous service to San Francisco's children by beginning now to lobby for changes in the Child Nutrition Act the next time it comes up for reauthorization (in 2009). The standard for qualification for free or reduced price meals is based on the federal income poverty guidelines, which are cruelly low in our high-cost region. San Francisco students whose family income is \$40,000 or \$50,000 per year, which might be considered middle class in some parts of the country, do not qualify for any meal subsidy, yet still live on insufficient income to meet their basic needs.

At the same time, the reimbursement rate for free and reduced price meals is the same throughout the country (except Alaska and Hawaii, where it is much higher) regardless of the cost of providing the meal. Advocates for social justice need to focus on both of these issues – unrealistically low guidelines for defining “poverty” and an impossibly low reimbursement rate. Activists must pressure Congress to modify the definition of poverty and the reimbursement rates to reflect high cost-of-living areas.

- **Work to limit advertising junk food to children.** The messages that our children (and all of us!) receive through the media have an enormous effect on their food choices. Compare the \$3.5 million annual budget for the National Cancer Institute's “5 A Day” campaign to promote the consumption of fruits and vegetables with the \$665 million annual McDonalds advertising budget.

Fast-food ad campaigns using slogans like “It's good to be full” promote overeating. Advocates can write opinion pieces about this issue, and about the need for government to regulate advertising to children. The public should be made more aware of the many avenues outside of traditional print and broadcast advertising (such as product placement in movies/TV shows, cross marketing of TV characters/movies with junk food, pop-up ads on the internet, websites devoted to junk food products, junk food ads which go directly to cell phones, and viral marketing) which are used to sell unhealthy food to children.

- **Demand more honest food labeling regulations, especially in regards to trans fat.** Products should not be allowed to claim “no trans fat” when in fact they can contain up to

nearly half a gram of trans fat per serving. Many packages contain more than one serving, so the consumer who eats the entire thing in one sitting, believing that it contains no trans fat, may in fact be taking in several grams of trans fat. Snack cookies and crackers individually packaged in “100 calorie servings” are especially appealing to harried parents shopping for school lunch box treats. Virtually all of them proclaim “no trans fat”, yet most list partially hydrogenated oils among their ingredients. Parents shopping with children in tow shouldn’t have to read the fine print to learn whether the claims made in bold letters on the front of the package are true or not. No trans fat should mean just that – NO trans fat, not “a little trans fat.”

●**Be proactive about getting better snacks into the marketplace.** Lobby snack food companies to produce snacks which are not just “less bad” for kids (ie, baked chips, which have less calories than regular chips, but no additional nutrients) but which are actually “good” for them. Less fat and less sugar is good, but why not also more whole grains, more fiber, more calcium, more protein?

For more on school nutrition nationwide, including archives of news articles about marketing to kids, school nutrition legislation by state, common myths regarding school nutrition, and the latest in the school soda wars, visit www.pasasf.org Scroll down to “Issues” and click on the first one, “improving food in schools.”