

## Healthful shift ahead for food at US schools

Students in Des Moines schools are getting a taste of the changes facing kids across the United States, if Congress cracks down as expected on what can be sold in school cafeterias and vending machines.

French fries, nachos, lemonade, Oreos and Pop-Tarts are out. Also gone: ice cream bars and other products that do not meet the district's standards set in 2005 for fat, sugar and sodium. Most soft drinks have disappeared from vending machines. Serving sizes are smaller, too.

The tougher standards are needed to address the childhood obesity epidemic in both Iowa and the nation, nutrition advocates say. Congress is due to rewrite regulations for school lunches and other nutrition programs this year and is considering a policy for schools nationwide that is similar to the standards in Des Moines schools.

But school nutrition officials caution that this battle of the bulge could include some unintended consequences: A la carte sales have dropped by half since Des Moines changed its standards. Some high school students are skipping the school fare to head to local fast-food places or convenience stores to get the french fries and soda they can't get at schools.

"Our responsibility is to make sure that kids get good, nutritious foods in school and that it's not undermined by what's sold in a la carte lines and vending machines," said Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin, who will oversee the nutrition legislation as chairman of the Senate agriculture committee. He has introduced legislation that would require the U.S. Department of Agriculture to set nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold in schools, including vending machines.

President Barack Obama has put child nutrition high on his administration's agenda, going so far as proposing to slash farm subsidies to increase spending on school lunches and other nutrition programs by \$1 billion a year. Congress rejected the subsidy cut but is looking for other sources of money.

About 37 percent of Iowa third- through fifth-graders were overweight or obese in 2007, according to the Department of Public Health.

### **It's "all healthy ... nothing I would eat"**

Revenue from a la carte sales, which help subsidize cafeteria operations in the district, have dropped from \$1.2 million in 2004, the year before the new standards were implemented, to \$682,265 last year.

No one knows how many students are leaving campus to get the junk food or sodas no longer available at school. Those numbers are not tracked. Participation in the regular school lunch program, which has long been subject to federal nutrition standards, has remained relatively stable.

Tyler Carlson, a sophomore at Roosevelt High School, often buys pizza in the school cafeteria, but like many of his fellow students he heads to the nearby Git-N-Go to get a Mountain Dew to drink with it. He skips the fruits and vegetables the cafeteria sells.

"I don't like the other stuff," he said.

Nathan Dzon, a junior at East High School, said he skips the cafeteria altogether: "I don't like the taste."

Instead, he goes to the Oasis grocery and liquor store across from campus or heads to the QuikTrip market a few blocks away. On a recent day, his lunch at Oasis consisted of a Honey Bun, a Caramello bar and some Mentos.

"I have a really high metabolism," he said. "I eat all the time and never gain weight."

Katelyn McCormick, a junior at East, usually eats in the cafeteria. She doesn't touch the stuff in the vending machines now. It's "all healthy, like, nothing I would eat," she said.

Under the district's policy, vending machines include products such as baked chips and low-fat crackers and cookies.

To Sandy Huisman, the school system's nutrition director, the Des Moines schools' experience both shows the need for national standards and raises cautions about the unintended consequences. Having national nutrition standards in place will encourage manufacturers to produce more of the low-fat, low-sodium, low-sugar products that the schools need, but the higher standards could also drive kids to get the junk food off campus, she said.

"The reality is that there are a fair number of kids who will go off campus and get what they want," she said.

Other school districts have maintained weaker nutrition standards to avoid the problems that have cropped up in Des Moines.

"If the standards are too tight, we are going to have a difficult time keeping kids" eating in the cafeteria, said Beth Hanna, school nutrition director for the West Des Moines schools.

Nevertheless, new statewide nutrition standards approved last month by the state education board largely mirror the Des Moines standards but also will rid schools of diet sodas, which are still allowed in Des Moines schools. The state's new policies take effect in July 2010.

The vending machines in Des Moines schools still have products such as Oscar Mayer Lunchables, Cheez-Its and M&M cookies, some of which will be unacceptable under the state rules. Packages of Ritz Bits, which are still available in the Des Moines high school a la carte lines, will be too high in sodium under the state rules.

### **"The food in schools is making kids sick"**

Congress will likely consider several approaches to addressing the obesity problem in the nutrition bill. Among the possibilities:

Setting new standards for products sold outside cafeterias, or directing the Agriculture Department to set them. The soft drink industry wants to implement voluntary standards that would bar the sale of nondiet sodas in schools. A study by the Institute of Medicine, a branch of the National Academy of Sciences, recommended restricting sports drinks as well.

Raising nutrition standards for federally subsidized school lunches, based on the result of a pending study by the Institute of Medicine. The likely outcome: Tighter limits on sodium, fats, and total calories.

Establishing bonuses for schools that offer more fruits and vegetables, especially those that are locally grown, and other healthful foods. However, there are other ideas for spending any extra money that is available for nutrition legislation. Anti-hunger advocates will pressure lawmakers to increase the number of low-income kids getting free or reduced-priced lunches by loosening paperwork and eligibility rules.

The soft drink industry has long resisted any restrictions on its products in school and will continue to fight limits on Gatorade and similar drinks.

"There are a lot of products that have no calories or minimal calories that kids should have available to them," said Susan Neely, president of the American Beverage Association.

Harkin said he prefers to prohibit sports drinks but is not sure the votes are there.

Regulating what kids can eat or drink at school is a safety issue, akin to protecting them from polluted air or other hazards, said Kelly Brownell, a nutrition specialist at Yale University who has testified before Congress on the need for higher standards.

"The food in schools is making kids sick," he said.

But what about the kids who don't want to eat differently and who head for the nearest convenience store or fast-food restaurant? The federal government can't stop that, Harkin said.

"There is an easy answer. Don't let kids leave the school grounds," he said. "This is where the parents ought to be weighing in with the school boards."

If they stay in the cafeteria, students in Des Moines are encouraged to eat a balanced meal. To qualify their selections as a standard lunch, the students must pick three to five items; otherwise they are charged a la carte prices for the individual items.

On a recent day, many students combined a vegetable-filled taco wrap with an apple or a cup of pineapple chunks. Other students avoided fruit and vegetables, opting simply for a chili dog and a serving of tater tots.

More than a few plates looked sparse or heavy on a single food group. One student left the line carrying a tray bearing a single slice of pizza and a carton of chocolate milk.

Lincoln sophomore Jennifer Juarez said she doesn't think too hard about creating a balanced meal. She just grabs what looks tasty on a given day. On Monday, her plate contained a cheeseburger, a banana and tater tots. Her other favorite school meals include baked potatoes, cheese bread and pasta.

Yenni Chavez, a junior at Lincoln, said she always chooses fruit to go with the rest of her meal.

Improving nutrition in schools will require cooperation from parents and students as well as school officials, said Marion Nestle, a nutrition professor at New York University and author of a diet guide called "What to Eat."

"It requires changing the culture, which not everyone is willing or able to do," she said.

### About the Author

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