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## The School Cafeteria, on a Diet

By ANDREW MARTIN

As students return to school this week, some are finding unusual entries on the list of class rules: fewer fried foods, smaller servings and no cupcakes.

School districts across the country have been taking steps to make food in schools healthier because of new federal guidelines and awareness that a growing number of children are overweight.

In California, deep fryers have been banned, so chicken nuggets and fries are now baked. Sweet tea is off the menu in one Alabama school. In New Jersey, 20-ounce sports drinks have been cut back to 12 ounces.

Food and beverage companies have scrambled to offer healthier alternatives in school cafeterias and vending machines, and some of the changes have been met with a shrug by students. The whole-wheat chocolate-chip cookies? “Surprisingly, the kids have kind of embraced them,” said Laura Jacobo, director of food services at Woodlake Union schools in California.

But some parents say that by cracking down on cupcakes in the classroom to celebrate birthdays and Halloween, school officials have crossed a line.

On top of the practical question of how PTAs and drill teams can raise the money that will no longer be earned with bake sales, there is a matter closer to the heart, where the cupcake holds strong as a symbol of childhood innocence and parental love.

“I remember growing up and a birthday party was a big deal when you got to bring a treat,” said Amy Joswick, who has two children in elementary school in Old Bridge, N.J., where cupcakes are not allowed at birthday parties. “I don’t agree with it because as a whole, parents should be monitoring what they are eating. It should start at home.”

Parents in Texas lobbied to get a “Safe Cupcake Amendment” added to the state’s [nutrition](#) policy. The measure, which passed, ensures that parents may bring frosted treats to schools for



In Hoover, Ala., students like Lindsay Pears are offered fruit as well as adaptations like whole-wheat pizza.



At Spain Park High School in Hoover, Ala., where Jacquelyn Davis, left, is the cafeteria manager, a local favorite called Milo's Famous Sweet Tea is banned. So are potato chips that are not baked.

celebrations.

One reason parents wanted protection for treats like cupcakes is the push to rid schools of junk food, itself a reaction to the growing number of children who are overweight. With so much focus on obesity, food and beverage companies have scrambled to offer healthier alternatives, like baked potato chips and an assortment of bottled water, and smaller portion sizes, like the popular 100-calorie packages.

Another reason is a federal requirement that every school district develop a wellness plan to help students eat healthier foods. Some states and school districts have simply adopted the federal standards for food sales outside the school nutrition program, which critics deride as lax and antiquated.

For instance, under the federal guidelines, jelly beans and Popsicles are banned because they have “minimal nutritional value.” But Snickers and Dove bars are not because they contain some nutrients, according to Margo G. Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#).

Foods and beverages that are not sold during mealtimes, or that are sold in vending machines outside the cafeteria, are not covered by the federal guidelines, leaving it to states or local districts to devise their own rules. (By contrast, federally subsidized school lunch programs are governed by strict nutrition standards.)

“The national policy is so pathetic that states who follow them should be ashamed of themselves,” Ms. Wootan said.

As a result, more than half of the states have adopted tougher guidelines for what can be sold or given away during school hours. For instance, New Jersey adopted its own nutrition guidelines, which take effect at the beginning of this school year, though more than half the school districts have already complied.

That means that when students return to Millburn High School in northern New Jersey tomorrow, pizza will still be on the menu, but it will be low-fat. Water has replaced soda in the vending machines, and sports drinks are sold in smaller bottles.

At Spain Park High School in Hoover, Ala., a local favorite called Milo’s Famous Sweet Tea has been banned from the cafeteria. So have regular potato chips; now baked chips are sold.

In central California, the Woodlake Union district pulled out its deep fryers over the summer



and replaced them with a convection oven.

“My staff thought they were going to lay everyone off because there wouldn’t be anything to cook,” said Ms. Jacobo, who explained that she discovered baked alternatives to the fried standbys. “The food is still acceptable to the kids.”

One reason that standards are needed is the rapid growth of food sales at schools, said Katie Wilson, president-elect of the School Nutrition Association, a nonprofit organization that represents school nutrition employees. Sales from vending machines, fund-raisers and school stores often sustain parent-teacher associations, sports teams and student clubs.

“It’s cheap and it’s quick and you make money really fast,” Ms. Wilson noted.

But as more and more children became overweight, it became apparent that stricter policies were needed to address sales of things like candy bars, she said.

About 19 percent of children ages 6 to 11 are considered overweight, while 17 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 19 are overweight, according to a 2003-4 survey by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the latest survey available on its Web site.

A bill sponsored by Senator [Tom Harkin](#), Democrat of Iowa, that is pending in Congress would authorize the Department of Agriculture to update its rules for what could be sold at schools throughout the day. Several previous attempts by Senator Harkin have failed because of opposition from the food and beverage industry.

This time around, however, the American Beverage Association, which represents the soda industry, does not oppose the bill but is trying to iron out differences with Senator Harkin’s staff about rules on beverages. The Snack Food Association favors guidelines rather than a mandate.

If there is a constant in the states’ nutrition policies, it is restrictions on soda. In New Jersey, for instance, all foods and beverages with little or no nutritional value are banned, ruling out soda and candy.

In Alabama, soft drinks are banned from elementary and middle schools, while only diet soda is allowed in the high schools. In Kentucky, 100 percent fruit and vegetable juices and low-fat milk are allowed, but no other beverages are permitted to have more than 10 grams of sugar per serving.

In a study last year, the Center for Science in the Public Interest graded the state nutrition

programs. The highest grade, an A minus, was awarded to Kentucky. Twelve states were awarded B's (New Jersey got a B, Connecticut a B minus), six states and the District of Columbia received C's, eight states were awarded D's (New York earned a D plus) and 23 states were graded F.

Kentucky received the highest grade because it limits sales from vending machines and school stores to the afternoon, and it has strict guidelines for what can be sold. Some low-scoring states, like Oregon, have updated their nutrition policies since the report card was issued.

While school officials maintain that students have generally accepted the healthier food, the new policies have not been universally embraced.

Middle schoolers in the district of South Orange and Maplewood in North Jersey were dismayed that the deep fryers were removed during a recent cafeteria renovation, cutting fried French fries from the menu.

"It wasn't a clean transition over that, I'll be honest," said Patricia Johnson, the food service director, who noted that the district now offers baked fries, though not every day. "We had a lot of pouting that lasted about two or three weeks, and they got over it."

And while some parents bristle at cupcake crackdowns, others argue that such guidelines are reasonable because children can be inundated with junk food at school.

MeMe Roth said she tried in 2005 to persuade other parents to ban Twinkies, doughnuts and other treats from celebrations at her children's school in Millburn, N.J. While some parents supported her, Ms. Roth, who is president of a nonprofit organization called National Action Against [Obesity](#), said that some were openly hostile. Her effort ultimately failed.

"Until healthful food stops competing against junk food, it doesn't stand a chance," Ms. Roth said.

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