

Allowing mobile vendors, even those offering healthier foods, to sell near schools would harm the most vulnerable, at-risk students - - and would also hurt SFUSD's budget.

- ◆ SFUSD cafeterias operate under the strict regulations of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which subsidizes school meals for qualifying low-income students with government funds, allowing these students to eat for free. Higher-income students pay for their school meals.
- ◆ Low income students who receive free meals cannot afford offerings from mobile food vendors, especially as healthier food is always costly, so only higher-income students could afford to patronize “healthy food carts.”
- ◆ Mobile food vendors near schools would constitute what are called “competitive” sales. Competitive sales drain money from the cafeteria, leaving less to spend on better quality food for those students who rely on school meals for much of their daily nourishment. This is why it’s commonplace for many municipalities to enforce laws keeping mobile vendors at a distance from schools.
- ◆ There is a stigma attached to standing in the free meal line, which discourages the students who most need a nourishing meal from eating at all. The stigma appears to be most pronounced for students of color. By middle school, students perceive that standing in the “free” line identifies them as “poor,” so many begin skipping lunch, leaving them hungry and less ready to learn, and further reducing cafeteria revenue.
- ◆ When the school cafeterias operate at a loss, the deficit must be paid out of the SFUSD General Fund, cutting into classroom needs – so competitive sales negatively impact the school district’s budget.
- ◆ The students most affected by the quality of school meals are the most vulnerable kids – the youngest and the poorest. That’s because elementary school kids don’t have other options, and low-income students can’t afford other “competitive” foods.
- ◆ Mobile vendors selling foods near schools, with only higher-income students able to afford those items, would create a two-tiered system – with “poor kids” eating in the lunch-line meal and the privileged patronizing the mobile vendors - increasing the stigma.
- ◆ Most SFUSD middle and high schools (like most nationwide) have in the past offered some limited competitive foods – a la carte “beaneries,” selling snacks that don’t qualify for NSLP reimbursement – but this is viewed as a serious barrier to social justice and equity, and one that SFUSD has been working for several years to rectify.
- ◆ In response to that inequity, SFUSD is currently piloting a new cafeteria model, the Super Choice Menu, at Balboa High School and Francisco Middle School. Super Choice offers a much wider selection to all students, with all choices qualifying for NSLP reimbursement, completely eliminating competitive “a la carte” sales. The goal is to expand the Super Choice model to every school.
- ◆ The African American and Latino students who are most likely to shun the free lunch are also more likely to have limited access to healthy foods outside school and to suffer from obesity and Type 2 diabetes. They also are more likely to be the students on the wrong side of the achievement gap. As is widely known, poor nourishment correlates with lower academic achievement.
- ◆ A setup that further stigmatizes low-income students, and also impairs the quality of the subsidized meals, and hurts the SFUSD budget, is likely to harm the health and even the academic achievement of the most at-risk students.

Allowing mobile vendors to park close to schools and sell competitively to higher-income students would be a big step backward, just as SFUSD is working to achieve fully equitable cafeterias.