

Is anyone doing anything about the food served in San Francisco schools?

Yes! Substantial improvements have been made, beginning in 2003 with a school board resolution and a pilot project at Aptos Middle School. If you want to join the advocates who have been working on this over the years, you might want to find out what's already happening and who the players are. Start with the website of the SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee, www.sfusdfood.org. The committee and its subcommittees are made up of parent volunteers, district staff, students, health professionals and other community members.

In early 2003, SFUSD began creating what's now called the Wellness Policy, which got the junk food out of our schools, improved the cafeteria "lunch line" meals and continues to address other foods provided in schools.

Before that, the "Beanery" a la carte food sales in middle and high schools sold nothing but unhealthy foods, from potato chips to Hostess snack cakes, and mega-sized, fat-laden pizza and cheeseburgers. Vending machines were stocked with 20-ounce sodas. And the cafeteria meals were largely "carnival-style" foods like corn dogs, with processed apple turnovers counted as the fruit serving. Today, all that has changed. Apples have replaced the turnovers. The cafeteria meals are healthier and more like home-style items, and all foods sold in the Beaneries and vending machines must meet SFUSD's comprehensive "no empty calories" standard.

So why do we still hear complaints about the cafeteria meals?

Because there's not enough money to make more sweeping improvements. The federal and state government reimburse SFUSD for meals for low-income students, but at a rate that's impossibly low for such a high-cost area. The low reimbursement rate means that there is only about \$1 to pay for a whole lunch, including milk. And for students who aren't designated low-income, SFUSD charges about half what neighboring districts charge for meals. The cutoff for being designated low-income is also cruelly low for a high-cost area, so charging what other districts charge would mean many children couldn't afford lunch. Also, SFUSD never turns a child away who wants lunch and has no money. Some other districts either let children with no money go hungry or give them a bare-bones "meal of shame" such as a bowl of cereal. All those expenses mean inadequate money for the actual food.

SFUSD meals are prepackaged and transported to the schools. Can we go back to scratch cooking in schools?

Twenty years ago, meals were cooked from scratch in nearly every school. (Of course, there were complaints about the food then too.) The increasing costs of labor and equipment led to closing down most of those kitchens; at many elementary schools, kitchen space was converted to classroom space to accommodate class size reduction in the 1990s. It's absolutely economically unfeasible to reopen them. It would cost millions and millions of dollars, and there's no source for that money.

Then what CAN we do to improve the food and make sure our kid are well-fed?

Finding more money to support school food is the single most important effort. The only way our financially strapped school district could increase the funding otherwise would be to divert it from classroom needs. The most effective action would be

to join efforts to seek out private funding, to lobby for higher reimbursement from the feds and the state, and to persuade the city that it should provide the resources to improve the quality of food served to our community's children at schools. Higher-quality ingredients are available – even without on-site scratch cooking – if money can be found for them.

Is anything else being done?

Yes – several schools are now piloting a “Grab n Go” breakfast designed to encourage more students to eat breakfast. Beginning in August 2008, all elementary schools will offer a hot breakfast.

Salads bars opened in 25 schools in 2007-08 and more are planned for 2008-09, along with a wider array of produce. Elementary schools without salad bars will be offering a wider variety of raw vegetables with lunch, not just baby carrots. Brown rice and whole wheat pasta are being introduced into the lunch program.

To learn more about SFUSD school food and find out how you can get involved, go to www.sfusdfood.org.