

The SFUSD Student Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee has called for imposing a limit keeping catering trucks 1,500 feet away from public schools. This Q&A produced by the committee explains the situation.

## **Why is it a problem when catering trucks sell food to students right outside schools?**

Our school district was far ahead of the curve in eliminating junk foods sold at schools. SFUSD imposed a high standard for healthy foods starting in 2003. Catering trucks undermine the healthy food policy when they show up at the front door offering the unhealthy foods and beverages that are no longer sold on campuses.

Obesity and its effects are the most devastating health crisis of our children's generation. Medical professionals expect today's young people to be the first generation in modern history to live a shorter lifespan than their parents' generation – entirely because of the effects of obesity. The obesity crisis does its worst damage in low-income African-American and Latino communities, leading to skyrocketing rates of asthma, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and coronary artery disease, certain cancers, and gallbladder disease. The costs in children's health and well-being and in public dollars are devastating. Poor nutrition also correlates with lower academic achievement and increased behavioral problems, as documented in many studies. And when students miss school because of obesity-related illness, or even out of embarrassment at being overweight, it costs the schools money in lost state revenue.

Junk food sold at school has been a powerful contributor to the crisis. Now that our schools have stopped selling junk food, the catering trucks are doing it instead. "Competitive food sales," a category that includes catering trucks, are a problem recognized in school districts nationwide, and studies have confirmed their negative impacts on students' health.

In addition, catering trucks compete with the school meals program by draining away money that would otherwise go into providing better food in the school cafeterias. That means the quality of the food in the lunch line suffers. And that impacts the most vulnerable students: the youngest, the poorest, and many disabled students. Those are the students who have no options besides eating the lunch-line meals in the cafeteria.

The daily lunch-line meal in SFUSD cafeterias is provided free or at reduced cost to students who qualify as low-income. Non-low-income students may also buy that meal for full price, which is still very low – \$1.75 to \$2. Those are the only foods available in K-5 elementary schools. Our middle and high schools provide the same cafeteria meals, and also offer a la carte food sales, run by SFUSD Student Nutrition, which generate income to help support the regular lunch line meals.

Elementary school students' only choices are the lunch line or bringing food from home. In middle and high schools, low-income and some disabled students often don't have access to or money for the a la carte sales or other options. That's why those are the students who suffer when the quality of the lunch-line food drops.

And there are still more negative impacts. In SFUSD, when competitive sales cause budget shortfalls in Student Nutrition, that comes out of the school district budget – in other words, the needs of schools, classrooms and students. So competitive sales hurt students and schools in various ways, and hurt the most vulnerable students the most.

In addition, catering trucks that sell to students with money increase the stigma suffered by the low-income students who can't afford to patronize them. Trucks catering to students who have money to buy junk food clearly establish two groups of students at a school – those who can afford to buy a junk-food lunch and those who can't. This increases the shame some students feel when entering the school cafeteria.

## **But shouldn't students have choices?**

The idea that students should be free to choose junk food has long been an argument promoted by the soda and snack-food industries. But the severity of the obesity crisis has made it clear that "free choice" for students can no longer be society's top priority. If access to junk food outside the school's front door leads to even one new case of type 2 diabetes in a student, is that an acceptable price to pay so students can have "choices"? We don't encourage teens to make their own decisions about sex, gangs and drugs. If we believe that it takes a village to raise a child, we recognize that it's the role of adults to guide and protect children and youth.

In any case, middle and high schools already do offer choices – and those are choices that do not harm young people's health or the schools' financial health. Students may choose salads, sandwiches and soups from the a la carte sales, low-fat Chinese entrees from a profit-sharing setup that allows student clubs to fundraise in a partnership with Student Nutrition, and healthy snacks and beverages from vending machines.

As we've seen, allowing "choices" that include catering trucks outside the door has a negative impact on the most vulnerable students – the youngest and lowest-income, and the disabled. Nearly 60% of SFUSD students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals, and over 21,000 students eat those meals every day. For many of them, the school breakfast and lunch are the only meals they get all day. Should they have to eat poorer-quality food, or smaller servings, because wealthier students want more choices?

## **What if the catering trucks only sell healthy food?**

There's no way schools can monitor what catering trucks sell. Some already claim that their offerings are "healthy," but along with yogurt and fruit they sell donuts, Twinkies and snack cakes. They sell drinks that are mostly high fructose corn syrup and water, and hot entrees which are far higher in fat than the schools' cafeteria meals.

And even if the trucks sold nothing but organic tofu and sprouts, they would still compete with the school meal programs, draining away money needed to provide meals to needy students and improve the school food for all students.

## **But the obesity epidemic can't just be blamed on catering trucks, can it?**

There is no one single cause of the obesity crisis. The junk food-laden environment surrounding our kids is certainly a part of it, and catering trucks selling junk food outside schools contribute to that environment.

## **Why call for catering trucks to stay 1500 feet from schools? That's a long way.**

Some SFUSD high school sites are so large that a shorter distance – measured from the front door – would still allow trucks alongside the building. And trucks that move across the street or down the block, close enough to attract a rush of students, may pose a neighborhood nuisance

and a traffic hazard. Catering trucks that are in view of the school are likely to lure students – which is also a problem at closed campuses where students aren't supposed to leave.

### **But this would hurt the vendors, and they're small-business people.**

With the City now providing regular cash flow to the schools, it has a strong interest in ensuring that the schools are using their funds prudently. To protect the student nutrition fund, it's vital that competitive sales right at the schools' doorstep be stopped. And the vendors are often businesses based in other communities who drive into San Francisco specifically to sell to schoolchildren.

In our country, we pass laws to protect the young, the vulnerable, and those who need protection, not to protect those whose business – even inadvertently – harms them.

The ordinance would not impact much of the busiest part of the city. The Financial District, South of Market, the Embarcadero, Fisherman's Wharf and other bustling areas where few schools are located would be unaffected.

### **Why is our school meal program so short of funds, anyway?**

The government reimburses the school district for meals for very low-income students. But the government funding falls far short in San Francisco, because the cost of living and the cost of labor here are the nation's highest. The income that qualifies a family for government-subsidized school meals is far below the self-sufficiency income in high-cost San Francisco, so many families that struggle economically still don't qualify. That's why the full price of lunches must be kept to \$2 and less.

In addition, SFUSD has a policy of providing a meal to hungry students who come through the lunch line with no money and no meal application on file. Other districts give such a child either a "meal of shame" such as a bowl of cereal, or no food at all. Few, if any, other school districts have the same "no child left hungry" policy. That costs our school district money, but we are not willing to shame children or let them go hungry as other districts do, especially because studies show that it is far harder for hungry students to learn.

### **Wouldn't students stop buying food from the trucks if school food were better?**

A few years ago, SFUSD meals were largely "carnival-style" food, heavy on corn dogs, French fries and packaged, processed apple turnovers. Today's school food is tastier, more nutritious and healthier, with less fat, more whole grains and fresh fruit, and better quality meat, as well as a wider variety of entrees. However, better food costs more! The food can continue to improve only if Student Nutrition Services has more money to do it. It's a step in the wrong direction when students flee to catering trucks, because that diverts money away from Student Nutrition, which means there's less money to make the food better.

Because catering trucks give students access to unhealthy foods and have a harmful impact on the quality of the food served in school cafeterias, we need legislation keeping catering trucks away from our schools.