



CASE STUDIES

Eliminating Electrolyte Replacement Beverages in California Public Schools



California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) (CPL) is a joint program of the California Department of Public Health and the Public Health Institute. CPL works to advance nutrition and physical activity policy in schools and communities in order to prevent obesity and its associated chronic diseases. Our efforts are centered around youth and parent empowerment approaches, policy and environmental change strategies, and community-based solutions that improve nutrition and physical activity environments. CPL works with state and local physical activity and nutrition leaders, key school and community organizations, school board members, youth, parents, and promotoras as stakeholder engagement is an essential component of obesity prevention and health promotion.

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Introduction	4
References	5
Case Studies	
Oakland Unified School District.....	6
San Francisco Unified School District.....	8
Lemon Grove School District.....	10



INTRODUCTION

Eliminating Electrolyte Replacement Beverages in California Public Schools

In 2005, California passed some of the most stringent state legislation in the nation that set limits on the types of competitive foods and beverages that could be sold a la carte outside of the federally-reimbursable school meal program.¹ Since then, public school districts throughout the state have worked to implement these nutrition standards, which banned products like soda, regular chips, donuts and French fries.

“The legislation got rid of the worst of the worst of these products,” said Peggy Agron, Chief of California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition), a program of the California Department of Public Health. “But the legislation still allows products that are not necessarily healthy or needed while at school.”

A loophole in California’s legislation allows electrolyte replacement beverages, a type of sugar-sweetened beverage commonly referred to as sports drinks, to be sold in public middle and high schools. Designed to be consumed only after long periods of physical activity, students do not need to consume electrolyte replacement beverages during

the school day.² A popular 20-ounce sports drink, for example, includes 8 teaspoons of sugar and 130 calories. For children, each extra can or glass of a sugar-sweetened beverage consumed per day can increase their chance of becoming obese by as much as 60 percent.³ In California, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is higher among adolescents who drink sugar-sweetened beverages than those who do not.⁴

A recent study looking at the impact of competitive food and beverage standards found that eight of the top 10 beverages offered for sale at California public schools were electrolyte replacement beverages.⁵ To address the prevalence of these beverages and the high rates of childhood obesity, in 2010, Senator Alex Padilla authored and Governor Schwarzenegger sponsored Senate Bill 1255, which would have prohibited public schools from selling electrolyte replacement beverages in middle and high schools during the school day and 30 minutes before and after school. The bill died in the Assembly Appropriations Committee. Despite this setback, many school districts are not waiting for state legislation to pass before they prohibit electrolyte replacement beverages in all their schools. Project LEAN highlights a few of these districts.

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ELIMINATING ELECTROLYTE REPLACEMENT BEVERAGES IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY | SUMMER 2010

Demographics:

- Pre K-12 district serving 39,000 students in 109 schools and 30 child development centers
- Student Ethnicity: 37 percent African American, 34 percent Hispanic, 15 percent Asian, 7 percent White, 7 percent Other
- Serves 43,500 meals and after school snacks per day on average
- 68 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals

Background

The Oakland Unified School District Wellness Committee made the decision to stop selling electrolyte replacement beverages (ERBs) – sugar added sports drinks - while drafting the district's wellness policy in 2005. The Wellness Committee, consisting of staff, teachers, parents and students, had concerns about the high rates of obesity in the community and agreed that the wellness policy should allow for the sale of only 100% fruit juice, fruit juice and water combination drinks, nonfat and 1% milk, organic soy milk and water. The Oakland wellness policy further stipulates that these are to be the only beverages sold in vending machines and for fundraising and student sales.

As the Director of Nutrition Services, Jennifer LaBarre was a bit hesitant to stop selling these products due to concerns about lowered revenue, but as a parent she realized, "I don't give my own child these beverages so I shouldn't be selling them to my students." The high sodium content of ERBs was her primary health concern and a deciding factor in her agreement to eliminate the sale of sports drinks.

Results

Oakland Unified School District chose to gradually phase out the ERBs in order to use up the remaining inventory as well as allow students to gradually adjust to the change.

As far as the feared revenue drop, Jennifer noted that since district enrollment was in decline at the same time, it was difficult to pinpoint the effect of eliminating ERBs. Jennifer concluded that a slight drop in revenue was not a good reason to continue to sell the beverages.

"If I'm not going to let my own child have something, I don't want to be serving it at school," said Jennifer. "I think of the students as my kids, too."



“If I’m not going to let my own child have something, I don’t want to be serving it at school.”

CASE STUDY

Policy Implications

Jennifer said she would have eventually stopped selling ERBs even without a policy directive, “but I may have taken more time to come to that decision.” She noted that having a policy that specifies which beverages are allowed means the change is much more sustainable for future years to come.

Advice for Other Districts

“A phase out (of sports drinks) could be a good way to go because it can be done just as you would any other menu change,” explained Jennifer. “There were no student complaints when the products were no longer available. You have to take the leap and just do it. It’s best for the kids.”

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ELIMINATING ELECTROLYTE REPLACEMENT BEVERAGES IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY | SPRING 2010

Demographics:

- Pre K-12 district serving 55,272 students in 104 schools
- Student Ethnicity: 31.6 percent Chinese, 23.2 percent Hispanic, 12.3 percent African American, 10.1 percent Other White, 9.9 percent Other Non-White, 5.8 percent Filipino, 4.7 percent Declined to State, 1 percent Japanese, 0.8 percent Korean, and 0.6 percent American Indian
- Serves 30,000 lunches per day on average
- 54 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals

Background

San Francisco Unified School District was truly ahead of the curve on wellness, adopting a strict wellness policy more than six years ago before it was mandated by federal regulation.

Dana Woldow, co-chair of the district's Student Nutrition & Physical Activity Committee (SNPAC), explained that the committee reached the decision to propose elimination of electrolyte replacement beverages (ERBs) – sugar-added sports drinks – after looking around schools and asking themselves, “Do you see any students who appear to be in need of electrolyte replacement? We looked and didn't see any! The proper use for these beverages is for rehydration after intense exercise which causes profuse sweating.”

The head athletics coach attended the meeting to make sure that ERBs would still be available to student athletes during competition. He also spoke against the sale of sports drinks in cafeterias and vending machines because he believed they were inappropriate.

“When we opened schools in fall 2003, all policy guidelines were in effect,” said Ed Wilkins, Director of Student Nutrition Services. “A la carte beverages had been limited to 100% juice and plain bottled water.” Sports drinks are still available to student athletes during games.

Results

Ed reported that in spite of all the changes that occurred at the time, a la carte sales remained stable, in part due to a pilot program begun in January 2003 that replaced non-nutritious foods and beverages, including ERBs, with healthier products requested by students.

Policy Implications

For the San Francisco Unified School District, the beverage standards are not just about eliminating non-nutritious choices, but also about ensuring that beverages sold provide good nutrition for students.



CASE STUDY

The current nutrition policy is very specific: water, juice and juice blends may not contain any added sweeteners, herbal supplements or caffeine, with a size limit of 12 ounces on the juice and juice blends. The milk standards specify 1% or fat free milk with no more than 40 grams of total sugar per 12 ounces (27 grams per 8 ounces), no Bovine Growth Hormone and a serving size of no more than 12 ounces. Rice, soy and nut milks are allowed (up to 12 ounces), but they must be enriched with calcium to at least 30% of the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) per 8-ounce serving or 40% of the RDA per 11-ounce serving.

“A la carte beverages had been limited to 100% juice and plain bottled water.”

Advice for Other Districts

“As the sneaker ads say, ‘Just Do It!’” advised Dana. “There is absolutely no reason why a student who does not break a sweat all day long and who is only getting 20 minutes of active movement in PE class needs to replace electrolytes. If they are thirsty, there is nothing more delicious or healthy than water.”

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ELIMINATING ELECTROLYTE REPLACEMENT BEVERAGES IN CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY | SPRING 2010

Demographics:

- K-8 district serving 3,800 students in 5 elementary, 1 K-8 and 1 middle school
- Student Ethnicity: 53.6 percent Hispanic; 20.8 percent African American; 15.1 percent White; 3.8 percent Asian; 3.2 percent Filipino; 1.9 percent Pacific Islander; 1 percent multiple or no response; 0.6 percent American Indian or Alaska Native.
- Serves 2,400 lunches and 1,000 breakfasts per day on average
- 73 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals

Background

Lemon Grove School District in San Diego County took a step-by-step approach to eliminating the sale of electrolyte replacement beverages (ERBs), sugar-added sports drinks, and, ultimately, all competitive foods. When Robin McNulty became the district's Nutrition Services Director in 2006, one of the first things she did was cut the size of the sports drinks being sold at the district's middle schools from 24 ounces for \$1.25 to the smallest size available: 10 ounces for \$1.

"Students wondered where the large size sports drinks went," Robin recalled. "And the food service staff was worried about the impact on revenue,

but there really was little impact on revenue and students ultimately bought the smaller size drinks." Robin said that students are only allowed to purchase two a la carte items so that, and the price, discouraged students from buying multiple smaller bottles.

In 2008 the district's Wellness Committee began discussing the elimination of ERBs. Two committee members who were reviewing the district's Middle School Student Handbook expressed concern about ERBs to the Wellness Committee. They cited overconsumption of ERBs by students, empty calories leading to overweight, and a misconception by students that sports drinks are a "healthy" beverage choice as their areas of concern.

Robin worked with a group of 30 middle school students to discuss healthier drink options and taste test various brands of 100% fruit juices. The students chose a brand of juice and flavors based not only on taste but also on the price point they believed their fellow students could pay.

The new juices were introduced at the beginning of the 2008-2009 school year at the same time the sale of ERBs ended. Surprisingly, there was no negative reaction from students. While the juices



CASE STUDY

“Students, Nutrition Services staff and school administrators need to understand the why, when, and other details of any change.”

were popular; the biggest sales increase was in water which, while costing slightly more than the juice, came in a larger serving size.

Results

Robin said that the revenue from ERBs was not a significant factor in making the decision to eliminate them. A greater impact occurred when the district stopped selling any a la carte foods except water at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year. The resulting loss in revenue has largely been replaced by an increased participation rate in reimbursable meals. Grab-n-Go and other innovative breakfast service options next school year should increase breakfast participation.

Policy Implications

The district's current policies allow for the sale of sports drinks so the Wellness Committee plans to propose a revision to the policies over the 2010-2011 school year. Robin said she does not foresee any resistance to putting into policy the changes her department already practices because it makes sense for the students' health and hasn't hurt the “dollar and cents” of the Nutrition Services Department.

Advice for Other Districts

Robin emphasized the need to communicate with stakeholders when considering any change. “Students, Nutrition Services staff and school administrators need to understand the why, when, and other details of any change,” said Robin. She recommends student involvement from the beginning to the end of the decision-making process and reevaluating progress along the way.

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