



EL MONTE UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT REDUCING COMPETITIVE FOODS AND BEVERAGES IN SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY | FALL 2009

Demographics:

- High school district serving 10,600 students in seven schools and one child development center
- Student Ethnicity: 77 percent Hispanic; 13 percent Asian; 10 percent Other
- Serves 6,400 meals per day on average
- 78 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals
- Most schools have closed campuses

Background

Food Services Director Suzy Sayre remembers when she first came to the El Monte Union High District (EMUHSD) in 2003 and saw the French fryers. “There was a haze of grease in the air, and students were buying French fries, cupcakes, cookies, big bags of chips and soda from a soda fountain,” she recalled. “There was little produce or whole grains in the meals.” Suzy said the “speed lines” were relatively fast, but theft of prepackaged a la carte items was a real problem. Suzy recalled that the Associated Student Body (ASB) ran student stores and vending machines and “they were selling everything” in 2003, including candy during lunch.

EMUHSD was scheduled for a Compliance Review the first year Suzy joined the district. After the review, she worked quickly to get the district into compliance by removing the soda fountains from the cafeterias before the start of the next school

year. She also created an accounting system to accurately track revenue and expenses. Then she turned to her goal of increasing revenue by promoting the sale of reimbursable meals.

“My motivation was to increase meal sales and create better meals,” explained Suzy. “I wanted to have all the foods be the same for all the students, including those getting free and reduced-price meals. This wasn’t the case when so many items were sold a la carte for cash.”

Challenges and Solutions

Suzy first eliminated all a la carte entrées, then competitive foods and beverages from the school cafeterias. She used a combined strategy of lowering demand for a la carte entrees by pricing them higher than complete meals, and slowly decreasing the number of competitive items. For example, she replaced the large bag of chips with a small one at the beginning of a new school year and heard no comments from students. The only item now sold a la carte is a two-ounce reduced-fat cookie that meets California nutrition standards for foods sold a la carte outside of the federally-reimbursable school meal program.

The elimination of competitive foods and beverages coincided with the opening of newly-remodeled



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cafeterias featuring attractive buffet lines, salad bars, pizza parlors and burger bars. Over a three-year period, all five cafeterias were painted and decorated with unique themes and fryers and soda fountains were removed. Bottled water is available with every meal as a free “bonus.”

“When school started no one asked where the soda and French fries went,” said Suzy. “If we’re going to take things away we need to give something back. The first day of school after the remodel the students were overwhelmed by the buffet lines and pizza parlor. Then the speed of service and quality of food impressed them so they kept coming back.”

Lack of space and lack of money to create more space for Food Services remains a challenge. “I need to speak up more about bond funding to include Food Services,” said Suzy. “Having to do all improvements from our profits means changes have to be rolled out slowly.” She has been able to purchase equipment and modernize serving areas, but entire kitchens need to be rebuilt and expanded as many are serving twice the number of meals they were designed to accommodate.

Suzy said that working with the ASBs was a challenge since the relationship between the ASBs and Food Services was competitive and not cooperative. She first focused on improving the meals and reducing the competitive foods and beverages sold in the cafeterias. Once relations between ASB and Food Services improved, Suzy was able to communicate more effectively with the ASBs.

Results

When Suzy came to the district in 2003, Food Services was selling 76,500 lunches per year, but losing

money. “I was told Food Services was into the general fund for quite a bit, something like \$800,000.” In 2008, Food Services became self-supporting with \$150,000 available to invest in modernizing the cafeterias. That year, 149,500 lunches were sold, an increase of 49 percent from 2003. The department now has \$1.5 million in reserve and has begun paying indirect costs to the district.

All five cafeterias have been remodeled and offer only complete meals that include fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Theft is no longer a major issues because no foods are packaged. Food sales by student clubs are still allowed but are more strictly monitored and coordinated with Food Services to make sure there are no more than four per year on each campus and that foods and beverages sold comply with nutrition standards.

While ASBs still purchase their own products to sell, Suzy encourages them to use her vendors or California Project LEAN’s online calculator, which determines whether a snack or entrée item sold a la carte meets California nutrition standards. The calculator is available at www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org.

For more information contact:

Suzy Sayre, Director of Food Services
El Monte Union High School District
626-444-9005
ssayre@emuhsd.k12.ca.us
www.emuhsd.k12.ca.us/index.php/front_page/

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