



LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT REDUCING COMPETITIVE FOODS AND BEVERAGES IN SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY | WINTER 2010

Demographics:

- Largest school district in California and second largest in the United States with 688,000 students
- Café LA, the food services division, serves meals in 800 schools and off-site locations
- 79 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals
- Student ethnicity: 73 percent Hispanic; 11 percent Black; 9 percent White; 4 percent Asian; 3 percent Other
- All schools have closed campuses

Background

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) was an early adopter when it came to making improvements to the foods and beverages it sold as a result of two landmark School Board resolutions: the Healthy Beverage Resolution in 2004 and the Obesity Prevention Resolution in 2005. The resolutions included nutrition standards for a la carte (competitive) foods and beverages. Prior to the resolutions, soda and other non-nutritious snack foods were sold at school stores and vending machines.

“Schools lived off of these student stores and machine sales,” said Florence Simpson, Senior Food Service Supervisor with Café LA, LAUSD’s food services branch. Florence said that student and parent groups also sold competitive foods “wherever and whenever.”

In 2006, the district passed a federally-mandated Local School Wellness Policy, which included a section titled “Reducing Competitive Food Sales.” LAUSD’s Wellness Policy, along with the Obesity Prevention and Healthy Beverage resolutions, reduced competitive food and beverage sales and increased student participation in the School Lunch and Breakfast programs.

“For us as a division, our motto is ‘Nourishing students to achieve excellence,’” explained Florence. “We’ve worked really hard to get a menu that is student-driven so they will eat and enjoy the meals and benefit from that. There’s no reason to have these competitive foods on campus. The students benefit from having a nutritious meal in a positive environment.”

Overseeing the changes was Food Services Director Dennis Barrett, hired in 2007. That same year, Chef Mark Baida was hired as Executive Chef. In the two years since they joined the district, Café LA has served 10 million additional meals despite a 9 percent decrease in district enrollment over the past five years. Chef Baida ensures that entrées are “student tested and student approved” by a representative group of elementary and secondary students before they are added to the menu.



Finding the best ways to reach principals with information and resources remains a challenge.

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While Café LA did not sell competitive foods prior to the passage of the resolutions, they did sell components of the meal a la carte. Now, with a focus on selling complete meals, the only a la carte items sold to students in the school cafeterias are milk and 100% juice. The focus on meals has resulted in more students eating balanced meals of better quality rather than snack items.

One successful strategy LAUSD utilized to increase meal quality while controlling costs was to decrease the number of entrees offered on any day from a high of 15 to the current three selections. “Because we’re eliminating waste, we can provide a better product and offer the items the students want like cut fruits and vegetables,” said Florence. School stores and vending machines now have better compliance with nutrition standards thanks to a requirement that schools purchase only products on the district’s “Approved List of Snack Foods” and “Approved List of Beverages.”

Challenges and Solutions

The overall cafeteria atmosphere and ability to get a large number of students served in a short lunch period were challenges throughout the district. Through bond funding, 63 middle and high school cafeterias were modernized during the 2008/2009 school year. The new “retail” atmosphere resulted in faster service, an attractive meal venue, and equipment that maintains proper food temperatures. To see a video of the new “food courts,” visit

http://cafe-la.lausd.net/What%27s_Cooking/Caf%C3%A9_L.A._Modernization

While there have been major improvements in the foods sold in school stores and vending machines since the school board resolutions, ensuring compliance district-wide is a continuing challenge. Last year, former school board member Marlene Canter asked the district’s Office of the Inspector General to conduct an audit to assess compliance with the board motions. Audit results were released in spring 2009 and the findings noted:

- A lack of knowledge by school staff, administrators and parents regarding the Healthy Beverage and Obesity Prevention resolutions;
- Little or no communication to school staff, administrators and parents regarding the policies;
- Sales of unauthorized food and beverages to students (e.g., nachos, churros, donuts) before, during and after school;
- No periodic observation policy to monitor vendors and prevent the placement of unauthorized products.

“There’s a big push this year to get schools to act on the resolutions,” said Florence. Board members have sent information to school administrators, including principals, about what items can and cannot be sold on campus, setting the expectation that the rules will be followed. The Cafeteria Improvement Committee, which includes parents, students and advocates, are in support of the efforts to continually improve the school food environment and are continuing to keep the issue in the forefront of the district. A hotline has been set up for cafeteria staff to call if they see violations on campuses. With a

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California Department of Education Coordinated Review Effort scheduled for this year, Florence said that “fiscal sanctions might be a tool to get compliance if all else fails.”

Vending carts selling foods and beverages outside schools is an issue that confronts many districts in large cities. LAUSD principals and community members have been educated on the appropriate municipal codes that address street vendors and given contact information for law enforcement agencies so they can call when vendors do not maintain the legal distance away from the school as required by municipal code. Parents are also being educated about why they and their children should not purchase food from these vendors.

Results

While LAUSD is focused on improving compliance with the foods and beverages sold outside of the cafeteria, the district has also realized many successes over the past five years. For example:

- Café LA served more than 120 million meals in 2008/2009. This represents an increase in meal participation of 5.24 percent with 25,000 more students served. Florence puts this number into perspective: “We serve seven times the number of people who can fit into the Rose Bowl every day.”
- The only a la carte items sold in the cafeterias are milk and 100% juice. Competitive foods and beverages, however, are still sold in student stores and vending machines.
- There is a renewed focus on ensuring that non-compliant foods and beverages will not be for sale anywhere on campus and that vendor trucks will be monitored on a more consistent basis.

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Support for this project was provided by a grant from The California Endowment.