



SANTA ANA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT REDUCING COMPETITIVE FOODS AND BEVERAGES IN SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY | WINTER 2010

Demographics:

- School district in Southern California serving 54,300 K-12 students in 63 schools
- Food 4 Thought, the food services department, serves 60,000 meals (breakfast, lunch and after school snack) per day in 63 schools.
- 84 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals
- Student ethnicity: 94 percent Latino; 3 percent Asian; 2 percent White; 0.6 percent African American; 0.4 percent Other
- All schools have closed campuses

Background

Changes to the competitive food and beverage environment in the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) began well before California's nutrition regulations went into effect. "We knew changes were coming and we didn't want to have to make drastic changes all at once," explained MaryLou Romero, Director of Food 4 Thought.

The first items targeted were 20 ounce soda fountain drinks and large bags of chips. First, single-serving chip bags and 12-ounce soda cans were substituted, and the next year soda was eliminated entirely in student cafeterias and staff dining rooms. Competitive foods sold at secondary school cafeterias are now confined to a la carte entrées and items from

a district-approved list. Elementary schools sell only fruit or milk a la carte.

"Even though the 20-ounce sodas were our biggest seller, I wasn't proud of that," said MaryLou. "I asked myself if I really wanted students to fill their bellies with soda or with real food. Every year we've eliminated certain snacks and we continue to do so even now."

These changes were made in the face of strong student, and even some staff, disapproval. Students at one school even threatened a walk-out when a certain popular brand of spicy, fried cheese puffs was removed.

"I got some phone calls and letters," recalled MaryLou. "But it was a decision I made and I stuck to it."

While food services eliminated soda, vending machines still carried the products. This led to a big drop in cafeteria revenue as students and staff took their beverage dollars to the machines. Each school site had control over its own machines, with revenues going to the Associated Student Body (ASB). However, in many cases, there were no formal agreements and record-keeping was sporadic.



CASE STUDY

“Everybody did their own thing,” said Karen Aeppli, Director of Purchasing and Stores. “At some sites, principals didn’t know who filled the machines or even where the proceeds went. It was a free-for-all.” As for the items stocked in the machines, it was “anything you could imagine,” said Karen, who noted that soda, chips, candy, pastries, cookies and ice cream treats were common.

As the result of a 2004 law regarding school contracts, districts with vending machines were required to bring the contracts under central control through a competitive bidding process. Beginning in 2004, SAUSD’s Purchasing Department worked with legal counsel at the Orange County Department of Education because they were one of the first districts to undertake a project to bring all vending contracts under the district’s control. The bidding process took nearly eight months to complete. Due to the need to allow existing contracts to expire, it was another 18 months before all machines accessible to students were changed to district-controlled machines.

Challenges and Solutions

MaryLou said that one challenge has been a drop in revenue resulting from decreasing competitive foods at the same time that operating costs such as labor and food increased. Meal purchases have remained relatively steady over the past few years even as enrollment has declined. MaryLou attributes some of that success to the district’s promotion of the meal program to students and parents. Cafeteria staff participates in every school’s Back to School Night and Open House and exhibits at community events. Plus, students taste test new recipes so there is buy-in for the meals.

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Removing non-compliant vending machines from staff lounges proved to be the most difficult part of changing the vending environment. The district’s interpretation of the law and its Local School Wellness Policy were used to persuade teachers and staff that the machines had to change and that teachers should serve as role models for healthy eating habits. All vending commissions now go through the district, with each Associated Student Body receiving funding based on individual school sales.

Karen said the timing of the vending and nutrition standards legislation coming together with the federal mandate for a Local School Wellness Policy provided an ideal opportunity to make changes. Successful implementation was possible due to the collaborative efforts of Food 4 Thought, Purchasing and the Wellness Committee with support and direction from the School Board and Superintendent.

Results

Food 4 Thought has continued to be self-supporting and invested in building a new central kitchen in 2000. It has also remodeled the cafeteria and dining area at Valley High School.

“The last few years have been tight due to increased operating cost though we hope to continue to at least break even,” said MaryLou. “There is increased scrutiny on school food services due to obesity concerns and we’re working hard to do what’s right for the kids.”

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