**Chew on This**

**By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog**

I invite you to put on your pointy policy wonk hat and take a look at NJ school food policy with me (or go Evelyn Wood and skim), then think about what’s going on in your own district and why.

The NJ School Nutrition/Wellness Policy (<http://www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/fn/childadult/school_model.html>), which sets the minimum standards for school food throughout the state, cites federal standards governing reimbursable meals and snacks (as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Child Nutrition Program: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/>) and articulates its own rules regarding other food made available during the school day.

Specifically, items that can’t be served, sold, or given away anywhere on NJ school property during the school day include: 1) foods of minimal nutritional value, which are defined by the USDA as soda, ices without fruit or fruit juices, gum, hard candy, jelly candy, marshmallows, fondant (e.g., candy corn), licorice, spun candy, candy-coated popcorn; 2) all foods and beverages listing sugar, in any form, as the first ingredient; and 3) all forms of candy. Items containing trans fats are discouraged and must be “reduced.”

Additionally, snacks and beverages that are sold or served on NJ school property during the school day can’t contain more than 8 grams of total fat (with the exception of nuts & seeds) and 2 grams of saturated fat per serving. At the elementary level, beverages can only be water, milk, or 100% fruit or vegetable juices and can’t exceed 12 ounces (except water and low-fat milk). In middle and high school, at least 60% of all beverages offered, other than milk and water, must be 100% fruit or vegetable juices, and no more than 40% of all ice cream/frozen desserts can exceed the standards for sugar, fat, and saturated fat.

In principle, federal and state nutrition policies aim to address the alarming trends in childhood overweight and obesity and their impacts on health caused by poor nutrition and a lack of physical activity. During the last 10 years, obesity rates have doubled for children and tripled for teenagers. More than a quarter of U.S. children are overweight. As a consequence, more than one in three white children born in 2000 will develop diabetes; black and Hispanic children have a one in two chance.

There has been good news on the federal front with the passage, in late January 2012, of stronger nutrition standards for school meals (see food advocate Marion Nestle’s excellent overview here: <http://www.foodpolitics.com/2012/01/cheers-for-usdas-new-nutrition-standards/>). These standards seek to enact some of the principles set forth in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/13/president-obama-signs-healthy-hunger-free-kids-act-2010-law>), including more fruits and vegetables, a greater variety of vegetables, more whole grains, and low-fat or skim milk with meals.

In practice, on the ground in our schools, my sense is that the reality is much more a work-in-progress. While school districts in NJ can adopt the NJ state policy as is or decide to strengthen its requirements further in their own district wellness policies, implementation and enforcement probably vary considerably. My theory is that the interest and commitment of parents are among the critical success factors.

A few years back, a heated discussion ensued at a PTO meeting when the topic came up of serving soda (as we had traditionally done) at our elementary school’s annual Field Day. A few parents felt that soda wasn’t appropriate for a school-day physical fitness event. Many others felt that soda was an acceptable treat for a special occasion. The fate of soda was decided when a parent (not me, I swear!) called our Superintendent to ask that the district nutrition policy be enforced. Food and beverages served during special school celebrations and curriculum-related activities are exempt from the state nutrition policy except foods of minimal nutritional value. Soda tops that list.

A friend and I did an informal survey on the blacktop after school and learned that most parents we asked either a) didn’t care one way or the other, in some cases because their own children didn’t drink soda; or b) thought soda was perfectly fine. Although this was a few years ago, I’m not sure the thinking has shifted much.

If it weren’t policy, my unpopular-around-here position would still be that unhealthy foods don’t belong in school. Why not? What’s the big deal, especially for special events and occasions?

First of all, special events and occasions happen with dependable regularity, and treats are served at almost all of them. From birthday parties to holidays to PTO events, cookies, cupcakes, and goody bags of candy are standard fare. When treats become so frequent, can they still be considered treats? How often do we want our kids to have these kinds of foods?

Second, while proper nutrition is a regular part of the K-12 curriculum taught in school, kids are watching what we do, and since it doesn’t jibe with what we say, they are far less likely to take good nutrition seriously. How can school tell our kids to eat more healthfully when they are offered unhealthy choices in the course of the school day?

Third, school sets standards and requires proper behavior from students. Why should what children eat in school be an exception?

None of this replaces our responsibility as parents to make sure that our children eat properly and exercise, but schools have the opportunity to play a big positive role…or not. Parents need to support schools in doing the right thing, not work at cross purposes with them. I know people don’t like to be told what to do or have their choices limited. But the reality is, companies that sell unhealthy foods already have undue influence, including on our kids, and an unfair advantage against real food, from how they’re engineered to appeal to us to how they’re relentlessly marketed. Where’s the choice in that?

So while complaining to school officials is one route, I figure that educating parents and engaging kids in meaningful ways might be a more effective one.

Here in our town, we have a great program, launched in late 2011, designed to do just that. It’s called Fit Kids (<http://nutleynj.org/content/nutley-fit-kids.html>), and it’s a joint effort of the town and board of education to provide free and affordable wellness events, activities, and classes covering everything from nutrition to fitness to self-esteem. In addition, one of the Fit Kids initiatives is a Healthy School Lunch Recipe Contest (<http://nutleynj.org/fit-kids-recipe.html>), which invites kids and teens to create a delicious school lunch that’s also consistent with the latest federal guidelines. The grand-prize winner will have his or her recipe incorporated into the actual 2012-2013 district school lunch menu, and other finalists will be featured on the menus of local restaurants.

I think Fit Kids is a good example of a way to help a community shift to make wellness a priority through hands-on experience of tangible benefits. Rather than a sense that policies are forced and enforced for no clear reason, the policy instead becomes the will of the people.

What’s cooking in your district?