
The San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco, CA

Folsom High: Fundraising vs. Nutrition

June 29, 2003

Editorial Page

<<<>>>

This document is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory website at
<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/1/CERU/Articles/CERU-0306-121-OWI.doc>

ALAJOS SCHIETER -- call him Al for short -- has traveled a long road from his days managing restaurants in his native Hungary to running cafeterias in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District east of Sacramento.

Schieter, who fled Hungary in 1969, is trying to return the school lunch program to its World War II roots by providing a healthy lunch for all students, not just poor students who qualify for a government-funded free or reduced-price lunch. So far, he's had some success. At several schools, he eliminated the line for free-lunch students and the other "a la carte" line for everyone else. These days, all students choose from the same menu in the gleaming new cafeteria. So as not to stigmatize the free-lunch students, everyone uses credit-card-type cards to get their meals.

But Schieter has discovered that the most intense competition comes not from the fast-food franchises springing up within a mile of the school, but from junk food and soda sales promoted by other school officials within spitting distance of his cafeteria.

Those operations raise nearly \$30,000 a year for the school's athletic, music and other programs. Schieter, by contrast, is miraculously able to just break even. Those tensions highlight just how difficult it is to carry out the seemingly simple task of offering students healthier food.

At least Schieter doesn't have to deal with a dingy, outdated cafeteria. Built only five years ago, Folsom High is spacious and modern, built with yellow bricks and green metal roofs. Down the road from the school is Intel's office park and a high-rise building occupied by Charles Schwab. The student body is diverse: a mixture of sons and daughters of middle to high income high-tech workers, and a smaller number of less affluent students whose families are employed in agriculture or work at Folsom state prison. But this is no school in California's backwoods. Folsom High is at the heart of the new, booming, expanding California.

At the entrance to the cafeteria, Schieter has hung a banner with the slogan "Eat Healthy! It's Your Choice." Below it are colorful charts listing the nutrition content of menu items of the day, including the fresh Mexican burrito or taco salad, bowls of udon soup, or teriyaki from the "Orient Express".

Miraculously, Schieter has figured how to serve nutritious food while keeping cafeteria operations in the black. By cutting down on dough and cheese, he serves up what he calls a healthy pizza. He bought an \$18,000 machine from Japan to churn out high quality California rolls. Next to it in the spacious restaurant-style kitchen are pasta machines cranking out fresh fettuccine and tortellini made with semolina flour.

But if you walk out the front door of the cafeteria, you can't miss the two vending machines emblazoned with the Pepsi logo. Walk another 50 yards and you reach the snack bar, where during a recent lunch period long lines of students waited to buy items like Rice Krispie Treats, Frito Lays, Skittles, prepackaged noodle soups, hot dogs and sodas.

The snack bar is at the core of the problem. Schieter would prefer that students eat at his cafeteria, but he has no control over what's served in the vending machines or at the snack bar.

The students who eat in Schieter's cafeteria fiercely defend their turf, as do those who use the snack bar. Shuttling between the opposing lines are groups of students who can't make up their mind between the two.

"Here everything is pretty good," says 10th-grader Brandon Peterson, moments after buying a bowl of teriyaki chicken in the cafeteria, his regular lunch hangout. Then he points to the snack bar, where clusters of students have gathered. "Over there, it's always packed, and they mostly just sell junk food," he says disparagingly.

"The food is excellent," says ninth-grader Sergio Malik, another cafeteria regular, as he carries a slice of steaming pepperoni pizza to eat at a green outdoor table. The snack bar, he says, "doesn't sell food; it sells junk."

Over at the snack bar, students defend their food choices as vociferously. "It's cheaper here, there's more variety, and it's faster," says Kernvir Chauhan, a 10th-grader, as he chews on bright blue gum. Aren't students worried about their health? "Nobody cares," he says. "'We're in the prime of our lives."

Nearby, Erin Fleming stands around with a group of 10th-grade girls. Her lunch: a bottle of spring water and a Hershey bar. "My mom's a health nut," she admits. "If my mom knew I had this every day . . .," she giggles, without completing the sentence. Kim Corbett's lunch is a bottle of water and a packet of M&M's. "My mom is just happy that I'm eating something, and that I don't starve," she says.

"I'm not opposed to nutritious food," says Bob Jarman, the student activities director in charge of the snack bar and vending machines. "It's just a matter of choice." The way he looks at it, "kids eat 21 meals a week, and the school controls five of them. If a student is obese, it's not because he is eating candy bars at lunch."

Over the past year, a handful of parents began expressing concerns about just what children are eating at school. "The more I see the angrier I get," said Susan Goodman, a former school board member whose children attended Folsom High until the past year. "Even it means some kids new band uniforms, none of this is worth putting this stuff in our kids' faces." In response, schools in the district have begun weeding out some of the most egregious offerings.

No longer can Folsom students buy Milk Duds, Whatchamacallits and Twix Bars. Instead, they can buy low-fat yogurt, turkey franks and baked chips. According to Jarman, at least half of the items offered come from a list of healthy snacks provided by Project LEAN, a state-run organization promoting sound nutrition.

The district does prohibit "foods of minimal nutritional value" being sold in "food service areas." But the policy apparently doesn't extend to selling carbonated sodas directly outside the cafeteria. And while some parents may be unhappy, others, like Julie Newman, president of Folsom High's PTA, are unconcerned. From her perspective, children should be making their own choices. Contradictions like these frustrate Schieter. He sees signs of hope, pointing to healthy food resolutions passed by a growing number of school districts. Yet at his own school, he says, "it's an uphill struggle."

He knows he's up against glitzy, high-cost advertising that promotes Pepsi and similar products, not only at Folsom High but wherever kids hang out. "It's not a question of who is winning," he says. "It's a question of who is losing." To Schieter, the answer is clear: Though they may not know it, kids are the losers.