

Mom's mission on school food

By Aleta Watson
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Sodas have disappeared from the 14 Pepsi machines at Bret Harte Middle School in San Jose.

Skittles, Nerds and gummy bears are missing from the student store. Flamin' Hot Cheetos are gone from the snack machines.

Students can blame Marjorie Freedman for the sharp decline in junk food at the Almaden Valley school this year. The mother of a Bret Harte student and a nutritionist with a doctorate from the University of California-Davis, she has made it her mission to turn the school into a model of healthy eating.

``You can talk academically all you want about childhood obesity," she said. ``If you don't change things at the school, what good is it? You've got to work at the grass-roots level."

Freedman says she had no idea how students really ate at school until she arrived on campus one morning about three years ago to pick up her older daughter for an orthodontist appointment.

``I just happened to be there at 10 a.m., break time, and I saw all these kids with soda and chips," she said, ``and that triggered it for me. I said, `This is wrong!' "

A fast-talking dynamo with an evangelical bent when it comes to nutrition, Freedman began trying to persuade school administrators to get rid of high-sugar, high-fat snacks. She didn't find a sympathetic ear until Don McCloskey became principal last year.

McCloskey, a former physical education teacher, also was disturbed by what his students were eating and drinking during school hours.

``We made the commitment last year that we would, to the extent we could, not contribute to the nutritional problems of America," McCloskey said.

Successful test run

• Parents enlist in the campaign

They faced serious obstacles outside the school's control. Bret Harte's cafeteria is run by the San Jose Unified School District, whose food services department is responsible for lunch programs at 45 schools. Snack bars that many students use instead of the cafeteria are also run by the district. And the soda machines are part of the district's exclusive contract with Pepsi, worth as much as \$5 million over 10 years.

So they started with yet a fourth food source, the school's student store. Profits from the store go to the student government fund for assemblies, dances and the like.

The store had been staffed by a school employee, but McCloskey turned it over to Freedman and two other parents for a two-week test run during STAR testing in May.

Instead of soda, chips and candy, they began selling juices and granola bars. The kids asked for soda but bought whatever was available, and the parents ran out the first day.

This trial was so successful, this year McCloskey gave Freedman free rein with the student store. She formed a snack committee within Bret Harte's home and school club and recruited about 20 other parents to help staff the operation.

Ann Sheridan, one of the volunteers, was stunned by how quickly students changed their eating habits.

``If candy is at the store, they'll buy candy," said Sheridan, whose two younger daughters attend Bret Harte. ``If apples, Go-Gurt and cheese are there, they'll buy that. It was surprising to me how easily they adapted."

Now students line up for Healthy Choice low-fat ice cream bars instead of a high-calorie version, for string cheese and jerky instead of taffy and Doritos.

They also besiege the cart that the parents staff at lunch time, selling turkey and avocado wraps, rice bowls and deli sandwiches from the district's food services operation. A portion of the cart profits go to the student store, which made more than \$8,000 from September through January.

All the food, Freedman said, meets the requirements of a California law enacted in 2001 to raise nutritional standards. The law, stalled by the state's fiscal crisis, limits snacks in elementary schools to 35 percent of calories from fat, 10 percent

from saturated fat, and no more than 35 percent sugar by weight.

“If you ask me personally, I would only have milk and fruit,” she said. “But this is reality. You have to make change in small steps.”

The student store is only part of the school food universe. With 1,300 students, Bret Harte needs many serving sites to feed them all in one half-hour lunch period.

So kids also can buy food from the cafeteria, the district-run snack bar and several food service tables set up around the quad. The food they get in those locations is almost identical to that served in San Jose Unified's six other middle schools.

In the cafeteria, students still pass up the bags of baby carrots and raw broccoli, fresh apples and oranges to grab a slice of Domino's pepperoni pizza and a carton of milk for lunch. On a recent day, a few picked the vegetarian egg roll with white rice.

At the snack bar, they buy chimichangas and french fries as well as shaker salads and yogurt.

Freedman does her best to influence the offerings across the campus, however. She's on San Jose Unified's SHAPE committee on student nutrition, which played a role in getting snack bars districtwide to replace the bestselling Flamin' Hot Cheetos and other fried chips with less-fatty baked chips.

She also persuaded the owner of snack vending machines on campus to carry baked potato chips, Wheat Thins and Nutri-Grain bars in place of fried chips and candy bars.

The new offerings may not qualify as health food, but Freedman says they're a step in the right direction.

Students aren't always thrilled with the changes.

“We don't have chips anymore,” said Maggie Nguyen, 12, as she munched a cookie from the snack bar at morning break.

“They took them away,” said her companion, Neeko Delrooz, also 12.

It's a real loss, added Suhitha Uppalapati, 13, “but we've gotten used to it.”

Switching drinks

● Sodas replaced ahead of new law

Freedman and McCloskey also trained their sights on the sugary, carbonated soft drinks in machines all over campus. They met last summer with Pepsi officials to replace Pepsi and Mountain Dew with Gatorade, bottled water and fruit-based drinks.

To make sure the sodas didn't get on campus anyway, Freedman went to school at 7:30 a.m. every Tuesday, when the Pepsi drivers were loading new deliveries, for weeks.

In January, three machines were switched to sell SoBe Synergy, a new vitamin- and calcium-fortified, 50 percent juice drink Pepsi developed to meet the requirements of a new state law, which takes effect in July.

The law bans sugary soft drinks on middle school campuses from half an hour before school to half an hour after.

Pulling the sodas has been a fiscal gamble. Bret Harte has received about \$16,000 a year in profits from the machines, which helped pay for services such as counseling that aren't funded by the district anymore.

No one knows how much profit the new items will turn when accounts are settled at the end of the school year.

Some students criticize the move.

“They need to bring soda back,” said Nicki Quinn, 13. “We lost so much profit.”

Others bring their own cans of pop from home.

But most have just started buying what's in the machines. Bottled water has become one of the most popular beverages on campus, and it's rare to see students drinking from water fountains.

McCloskey says removing soda from the machines is the right thing to do.

“I'm not banning soda from my campus,” McCloskey said. “I'm just not going to sell it because it looks like I endorse it.”

Machines' place

● Revenue, choice of items cited

District officials defend the machines as an important source of money for schools. “The big thing with Pepsi was the revenue,” said trustee Veronica Lewis, who also sits on the SHAPE committee. “Kids are drinking these soft drinks -- Pepsi, Gatorade, whatever they're drinking -- at home.”

She points out, though, that the contract gives the district the right to choose what they put in the machines. “It's vital

but that doesn't mean that we can't put in a very stringent list of options."

Altogether, the changes at Bret Harte haven't been as far-reaching as in districts such as Folsom-Cordova Unified, near Sacramento, where all schools removed sodas, junk food and a la carte sales from the lunch program.

But they set it apart from most middle schools in Santa Clara County.

``It's kind of unique and a lot of it's due to Margie," said Chuck Davis, San Jose Unified's manager of food services, referring to Freedman. ``We're hoping what she's doing there will expand."

Freedman contends that any school can make the same changes if the community rallies around the idea of giving students healthier choices.

``I feel very, very passionately about this issue of childhood obesity," she said. ``If you have a teenager who is obese, they have an 80 percent chance of being obese for their whole life. It's sad for me to see this."

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