



Zero tolerance for junk food at schools?

By Susan Pollack of The Detroit News

Congress wants to ban French fries, candy bars, even at some fundraisers.

Congress wants to expel all bad food from the nation's schools. That means waist-expanding snacks like pop, candy and fries may soon disappear, thanks to legislation introduced Thursday. Under the bill, an amendment to the National School Lunch Act, high nutritional standards would be required of all food sold on school premises. That means not just in cafeterias, but in vending machines, school stores, and snack bars or anywhere on school grounds during the day – even at fundraising events.

The move is being praised by childhood nutrition advocates, health care professionals, and many parents in Michigan.

“Getting the pop out of the schools would be great,” Lisa Merrill, a registered dietician with offices in Royal Oak and Woodhaven, said Thursday. “So many kids right now are pre-diabetic or insulin-resistant. If you're 10 now and get diabetes in five years, then 20 years down the road, if you're not taking care of yourself, quality of life would be terrible.”

More schools are offering healthier food choices, but officials say it's a tough sell.

“Realistically, pizza and fries are what kids eat these days,” said Frank Ruggirello, spokesman with Plymouth-Canton Community Schools.

Not surprisingly, several Metro Detroit teens put thumbs-down on the proposed school junk-food ban.

Jennifer Watson, a junior at Southfield Lathrup High School, and Claire Berger, a seventh-grader at Brownell Middle School in Grosse Pointe Farms, said students should be allowed to make their own food decisions.

“Going without potato chips would ruin my lunch,” said Berger, 13, who buys them as a treat with her otherwise healthy lunch.

Watson, celebrating her 17th birthday today, says administrators already have removed pop machines from her school and she would miss the occasional fries with cheese she buys in the cafeteria. “I know a lot of overweight kids at my school, but they’ve made that choice,” she said, “They’ll be eating it out of school anyway.”

Pop firms will likely protest

Merrill, who counsels children and families and lectures on nutrition issues, says she’s not optimistic that a bill banning all sugary and fatty foods would be successful because of probable opposition from beverage-makers and junk food purveyors.

“They pay a ton of money (to get their products in schools) and, unfortunately, I think you would lose some of the school programs without it.”

The measure, which has strong bipartisan support in both houses of Congress, would do on a national level what many school districts, including some in Michigan, have been trying to do for years: require that the schools set an example by providing only healthful food and thus perhaps reduce the incidence of childhood obesity.

Despite strong support in Washington, Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, also is skeptical. “My fear is that the food industry, with the soft drink industry taking the lead, will work in it’s hardest to try to weaken or kill this act.”

Bill targets all foods sold

The bill would apply to all foods other than the official school lunch, the meal for which schools receive government aid and which is already covered by other high-nutrition standards. Currently, the sale of other foods is permitted in school if they contain at least 5 percent of the recommended daily allowance of protein and certain vitamins and minerals. This standard applies regardless of the product’s calories, fat, added sugars or sodium. Under this approach, French fries, ice cream, candy bars, cookies, chips, snack cakes, and doughnuts are allowed. Seltzer, jelly beans, chewing gum, lollipops, cotton candy and breath mints are not.

The new list of foods would take into account whether a product promoted obesity or chronic illnesses. The choices would come from recommendations of the Institute of Medicine, which expects to have a report ready this fall.

Enforcement would rest with the Department of Agriculture, which currently has authority over the official school lunch, and could do a good job with all other food,” said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, which worked closely with Congress on the legislation.

“When parents send their kids to school with lunch money, they shouldn’t have to worry that the money will be spent on Flaming Cheetos and a Coke instead of a balanced meal,” she added.

Junk food readily available

Today, candy, pop, and other snacks are sold in nine out of 10 schools, according to the Government Accountability Office. Already plentiful in high schools, junk food has become more available in the middle schools over the past five years.

Dr. Kimberlydawn Wisdom, Michigan’s surgeon general, said the legislation would tie in well with efforts underway in Michigan, including a mandate that every district must have a local “wellness policy” in place by the first day of the 2006-07 school year.

The wellness plan includes such items as formation of a health team and monitoring system, plus healthier choices in lunchrooms and vending machines and more physical activity.

“Schools around the state are embracing a healthier school environment and policies that support healthier lifestyles,” she said, citing a student-initiated ban on carbonated beverages at Lakeview High School in Battle Creek.

Supporters of the bill have been marshalling evidence to contradict the usual criticism of proposals to serve only nutritious food in schools: that children will not eat it and that schools cannot afford to lose the revenue brought in by fatty or sugary products.

Healthful options hike profits

A survey by the Agriculture Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that of 17 schools that began offering healthful options, 12 actually increased revenue, while one lost marginally.

The four others reported no change.

The American Beverage Association, a trade group, said the legislation was unnecessary because since August members of the association have limited sales of full-calorie soft drinks to 50 percent of offerings in high schools.

They are not available in lower grades.

That's the case at Plymouth-Canton Community Schools, where the district was working Thursday on renewing its contract with Coca-Cola, said Ruggirello, director of Community Relations.

He said the district already has taken steps to offer more bottled water in vending machines and whole wheat crusts on pizzas, while trying to convince students who buy lunch to balance French fries and pizza with apples or other healthful choices.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, who introduced the bill in the house, thinks it is overdue.

"We talk a lot about healthy nutrition, we teach kids about the food pyramid, and then they go down the hallway and get the high fat, high sodium and high junk available in the vending machines," she said. "We need to be consistent. People are beginning to connect the dots between rising health care costs and obesity."

Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, who introduced the legislation in the Senate, said, "Junk food sales in schools are out of control. I think finally members of Congress are asking, 'Why do we have soft drink vending machines in our schools?'"

Kimberly Campbell, President of Anderson Middle School in Berkeley, has wondered the same thing and says she has tried to galvanize parent support for healthier choices.

"I know the schools get money for having the vending machines but I'm not very happy about it," she said. "The lunch aides are distressed, too. Several times they've told me how terrible it is what kids eat for lunch: literally a couple candy bars and a can of pop."