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L.A. Unified removes flavored milk from menus

The Los Angeles school district becomes by far the largest in the country to do so, as part of its effort to make school food healthier and help combat childhood obesity.

By Mary MacVean, Los Angeles Times

June 15, 2011

Chocolate and strawberry
milk are out.

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Next to go: Corn dogs
and chicken nuggets.

The Los Angeles Unified
School District on
Tuesday, with a 5-2 vote
on a new dairy contract,
became by far the largest
district in the country to
remove flavored milk
from its menus, part of
its effort to make school
food healthier and help
combat childhood obesity.

The milk issue has overshadowed other changes in the district's food services division, which serves 650,000 meals a day at 1,000 sites. A menu overhaul is underway that will mean fewer meals that resemble fast food and more vegetarian offerings. Spinach tortellini in butternut squash sauce and California sushi rolls, along with many ethnic foods, are to be added. Corn dogs, chicken nuggets and other breaded items are out, said Dennis Barrett, food services director.

"Absolutely, by the fall the district will be a national leader," said Matthew Sharp, senior advocate with the California Food Policy Advocates, who has long worked on school food reform.

The Board of Education does not generally vote on individual menu items, but it weighed in on flavored milk because it must approve large contracts. The board approved a five-year, \$100-million dairy contract Tuesday that excludes chocolate and strawberry milk. It includes low-fat and nonfat plain milk as well as soy and Lactaid milks.

L.A. Unified, the nation's second-largest district behind New York City, has been in the forefront among large urban districts in the effort to improve cafeteria food. The district banned sodas on campuses in 2004, starting a trend followed by the state and districts across the country. Later that year, the school board passed a motion to ban the sale of junk food during the school day by restricting the calories and fat content in snack foods. It also endorsed farm-to-school programs and called for more produce to be served.

And in 2005, the board approved the Cafeteria Improvement Motion, which required that foods have less salt, banned added trans-fats and limited saturated fats.

Not every initiative has panned out. A call for salad bars at all schools "where facilities permit" has left many campuses without them. And some school food activists and others say the cafeterias still have a long way to go.

Among his first acts as superintendent in April, John Deasy appeared on Jimmy Kimmel's TV talk show with celebrity chef Jamie Oliver to say he would propose eliminating flavored milk.

Responding to Tuesday's decision, Oliver said, "This is a giant step forward for the health and future of 680,000 kids in Los Angeles, and leads the way for more school districts around the country to follow." Oliver set his recent "Food Revolution" reality TV series in Los Angeles, and, among other things, loaded a school bus with sand to demonstrate students' sugar consumption.

Parents and others have also lobbied against chocolate and strawberry milk, saying flavored milk contains unnecessary added sugar in a county where about one in three kids is overweight or obese.

Board member Tamar Galatzan, who voted against the plain-milk contract, suggested that the district was letting "a TV chef who's trying to get publicity" dictate the decision.

"I think we are demonizing milk," Galatzan said. The juice the district serves at breakfast has more sugar than flavored milk, she said.

Board member Yolie Flores, who voted in favor of the contract, said students tell her that food is their No. 1 issue at school, and she wondered how it can be appealing and healthy when the district has "77 pathetic cents" to spend on food per meal.

A cup of fat-free chocolate milk served in L.A. Unified has 120 calories, with 20 grams (80 calories) of sugar. Strawberry fat-free milk has 130 calories, with 26 grams of sugar. White, plain nonfat milk has 90 calories, with 12 grams of sugar. (Milk contains some natural sugar in the form of lactose.) For comparison, a cup of Coke has 26 grams of sugar.

Emily Ventura, a research fellow at USC's Childhood Obesity Research Center, said a child who chooses a school breakfast of sweetened cereal, chocolate milk, coffee cake and juice would eat 51 grams, or 204 calories, of added sugar.

Some flavored-milk advocates say students won't drink milk at all if chocolate or strawberry isn't offered. Julie Buric, vice president of marketing for the Milk Processors Education Program, cited an industry-funded study that shows milk consumption can drop 35% when flavored milk disappears. And in January the dairy industry held a seminar for California cafeteria workers called "Keep Flavored Milk From Dropping Out of School."

About 60% of the milk taken by students is flavored, and some officials as well as the dairy industry say plain-milk-only policies could keep kids from the lunch lines altogether. Students are required to take three of the four items offered for breakfast and four of the five at lunch in order for school districts to receive reimbursements from the federal School Lunch Program and breakfast program.

The district needs to attract students to the cafeteria with an effective campaign that will introduce students to the new menu items and explain why flavored milk has disappeared, said Sharp of California Food Policy Advocates.

Megan Bomba, a project coordinator with Occidental College's Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, agreed, saying "the meal needs to be better, not [that] we need to keep chocolate milk" to attract students to the cafeteria, she said.

The menu proposed for fall sounds more appealing and sophisticated, she added.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs school food programs and promotes the dairy industry, allows flavored milk in reimbursable school meals. New York City schools serve chocolate milk. Berkeley, Compton and San Diego as well as Boulder, Colo., Minneapolis and Washington, D.C., have eliminated flavored milk with at least some meals.

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