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# California school lunches missing the mark for nutrition standards

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July 6, 2012

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## *California Watch*

In fall 2008, state regulators began a routine analysis of the school lunches served in Wheatland, a rural community an hour north of Sacramento.

Reviewers found typical cafeteria fare – chicken nuggets, hamburgers, spaghetti with breadsticks and a salad bar. But the nutritional levels were among the worst in the state, raising red flags for high fat content, low fiber and excessive sodium.

Federal regulations limited fat to 30 percent of lunch calories, but some Wheatland School District students received meals that had 51 percent of their calories from



Cafeteria worker Sophia Villareal gets student's names as kids get their at Brockton Elementary School Monday, June 29, 2012 in Los Angeles, Calif. (Photo by Richard Hartog/California Watch)

fat and contained more than 50 grams of fat.

Wheatland officials say they have since made improvements, but their struggles and violations are part of a larger problem. Hundreds of school districts have fed children fattening, salty and nutritionally deficient meals and face infrequent oversight.

A California Watch analysis shows 60 percent of the school lunches reviewed by the state in the past five years failed to meet at least one federal nutritional requirement.

Congress created the National School Lunch Program in 1946 to address malnutrition in schools while dealing with agriculture surpluses. The \$10.8 billion program serves about 32 million lunches a year, nearly two-thirds of which are provided free or at a reduced price to low-income students.

To receive federal funding, schools are required to meet nutritional benchmarks, including limiting fats and serving enough calories.

California Watch found most districts got high marks for serving foods with key nutrients, including calcium, vitamin A and vitamin C. But there was vast room for improvement:

- About 30 percent of school districts exceeded the saturated fat limit.
- Four out of five districts exceeded recommended sodium levels.
- More than 200 of about 860 districts and charter schools reviewed failed to meet three or more nutritional standards.

State regulators are required to analyze school lunches a minimum of once every five years, but more than 100 districts and charter schools have gone at least that long without an inspection.

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State officials said budget shortfalls have limited their ability to perform reviews. As for the meals, they point out that foods have improved over time.

“I would love to have all the agencies meeting the requirements, but even more of them weren't meeting them five to 10 years ago,” said Suzanna Nye, the chief monitor for the state's Child Nutrition Programs. “To me, we're moving in the right direction.”

Despite the problems, California is considered a leader in the nation when it comes to school lunches. State legislators banned trans fats from school cafeterias beginning in 2009, and many districts have adopted best practices, such as buying fresh produce from local farms.

Only 7 percent of schools surveyed nationwide met all nutritional requirements in a 2007 **study** commissioned by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which administers the National School Lunch Program.

California school officials say they're making Herculean efforts to overcome a slew of obstacles: tight budgets, minimal kitchen equipment, untrained staff, short lunch periods and picky eaters.

But some school food reformers say those challenges are no excuse, given what's at stake. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly one-third of American children are overweight or obese, which places them at increased risk for Type 2 diabetes,

hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Children consume about 40 percent of their daily calories at school, so experts agree that school lunches must help address the obesity epidemic.

California schools received about \$1.3 billion in federal aid to administer the lunch program last year. Although funding varies by district, the federal **reimbursement rate** is \$2.77 for each free lunch served, to cover the cost of food, labor and overhead. Many public health advocates agree that the program is underfunded but say schools need to innovate and find new solutions to provide healthier meals.



A student eats his cereal during breakfast period at Brockton Elementary School Monday, June 29, 2012 in Los Angeles, Calif. (Photo by Richard Hartog/California Watch)

Earlier this year, first lady Michelle Obama heralded some of the most **dramatic changes** to the 66-year-old school lunch program. Beginning this week schools around the country are required to serve fruits and vegetables every day and boost whole-grain products. Starting in 2014, lower sodium levels will be required, not just recommended.

The changes have received widespread praise. But some researchers say it doesn't bode well that so many schools in the state aren't meeting current guidelines, which are less challenging.

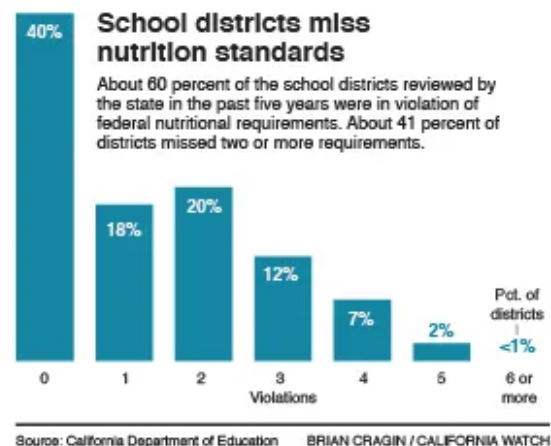
"The overwhelming majority of schools need to make significant improvements," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the nonprofit **Center for Science in the Public Interest**. "We're failing our kids."

## **‘Sick to my stomach’**

For weeks, Heidi Zacher’s daughter had been begging her for a lunch date at school. So one fall day, Zacher stopped by the cafeteria at Northside School in Cool, nestled in the Sierra Nevada foothills. She knew the cafeteria served hot dogs and pizza every week, so her expectations weren’t high. But she was still surprised by “Frito Pie.”

“I got a bag of Fritos, and a scoop of chili with some cheese sprinkled on top,” Zacher said. “I was kind of sick to my stomach.”

She brightened up when she saw the salad bar but couldn’t bring herself to eat the wilted romaine lettuce and dried-out carrot sticks. After that lunch, Zacher began fundraising for a school garden for the district, Black Oak Mine Unified.



On paper, Black Oak Mine meets all the federal nutritional standards. In its review four years ago, fat levels, iron and other nutrients were better than state averages.

The district’s kitchen manager, Katie Betts, said she personally would favor more fresh food. But she says she must cater to lower-income children who need meals packed with carbohydrates, protein and nutrients they might not get at home. Plus, she said, the chaotic mealtimes necessitate foods that children can hold in their hands.

“You don’t want to serve children a chef salad and have them eat it with a spork,” Betts said, referring to the combination fork-and-spoon utensil.

Therein lies one of the biggest debates about school lunch: Do you serve children what you think they want (fast food) or try something fresh and wholesome, knowing they might reject it?

The answer, for most schools, is the kid-friendly stuff. Meat pizza is the most commonly offered lunch entree in U.S. high schools and middle schools, according to the 2007 USDA report.

The report reviewed a week's worth of menus from a nationally representative sample of 397 schools. About one-third of the menus included dessert, usually a cookie, cake or brownie that sometimes counted toward a grain requirement. About 43 percent of entrees were commercially prepared, with french fries, chicken nuggets and pizzas being the most commonly served processed items.

Some schools served twice the maximum recommended sodium amount, the report noted, in part because of "the frequent use of commercially prepared items."

Food industry officials say schools have made major improvements in recent years.

"School meals are very healthy," said Diane Pratt-Heavner, spokeswoman for the **School Nutrition Association**, which represents cafeteria workers and food processors. "Schools are using farm-to-school programs, using more locally grown foods, introducing more salad bars and switching to healthier products."

But many scholars believe the food that students actually eat is worse than the federally subsidized lunch. Research has shown lunches brought from home typically have fewer nutrients and contain snacks high in sugar or fat.

Most schools also offer what are called "competitive foods," including a la carte lines and vending machines. Cafeterias often use these sales to help

them break even. A 2012 federal **report** found the most popular a la carte items sold are chips, followed by cookies, pizza and milk.

### **Too much fat, sodium**

Nearly one-third of California school districts reviewed by the state failed to limit saturated fat to 10 percent of lunch calories, as required. The data included districts reviewed by the state between October 2006 and October 2011. The state studied one week's worth of lunches at each district, calculating averages for fat, calories and several nutrients, based on all the lunch components.



Close up photo of “charbroiled sliders with potato smiles” during lunch period at Brockton Elementary School Monday, June 29, 2012 in Los Angeles, Calif. (Photo by Richard Hartog/California Watch)

The district that served the highest level of saturated fat was the Leggett Valley Unified School District, north of Mendocino. Nearly 17 percent of calories were from saturated fat when the district was reviewed five years ago.

The lunches analyzed included: an enchilada casserole, a barbecue sandwich, stir-fried vegetables with eggs and a daily salad bar that had 32 grams of fat per serving.

Clifford Skaggs, the district's food service director, noted that reviewers praised the wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. He said he has since implemented “drastic changes,” switching from beef to turkey in some entrees, adding more vegetables and cutting cheese portions.

Another problem area for schools is sodium. More than 4 out of 5 districts reviewed by the state exceeded the federal recommendation.

Schools need to start cooking fresh meals with less salt, said Matthew Sharp of California Food Policy Advocates, which has led several initiatives to improve school meals.

## **Behind the data**

It's difficult to draw conclusions about a lunch based solely on the state's nutrient data, said Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley. Sodium and fat levels tell part of the story, she said, but it's also important to consider whether schools serve a variety of vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains.

To look behind the numbers, California Watch zeroed in on a dozen districts with some of the highest fat and sodium profiles and lowest nutrient levels. The analysis focused on more than 1,000 pages of state documents tracking district menus and food preparation and found complex scenarios that resisted generalizations.

The districts spanned the state, including large urban areas and small rural ones. They ranged dramatically in their preparation – many served processed foods, but several cooked from scratch. The menus analyzed included a fair amount of greasy fare like french fries and tater tots, but several schools also offered salad bars with heart-healthy jicama, garbanzo beans and celery sticks.

While scores of districts aren't meeting the mark, hundreds of others are, including a vanguard of national models.

Consider the Berkeley Unified School District, which offers salad bars in all its schools every day. Hamburgers and hot dogs come from grass-fed animals. Almost all the food is made from scratch, including ethnic specialties like Moroccan carrot salad and couscous with lentils.

The Salida Union School District near Modesto feeds thousands of private and charter school students outside the district to draw in more revenue.



That money makes it possible to offer at least four lunch entrees daily.

Salida's menu is filled with fast-food staples like pizza and chicken nuggets, but they're healthier versions made with whole grains and low-fat cheese. The district boosted participation with aggressive marketing and popular entrees and has earned the top designation in a federal program known as the **HealthierUS School Challenge**.

The voluntary program is run by the USDA and recognizes schools that meet stringent standards for nutrition and exercise. Eleven other districts in the state have been recognized, including the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The district overhauled its lunch menu last fall to drop what officials called "carnival food." Schools got rid of nachos, corn dogs and chicken nuggets in favor of dishes like beef jambalaya, hummus and quinoa salad.

But many students rejected the new fare. Early on, student participation dropped 13 percent and an underground market of chips, candy and other junk food reportedly thrived. District officials say much of the drop was due to unrelated issues, including a 2.9 percent dip in enrollment.

Officials have since revised dozens of recipes and say student participation has recovered.

"We haven't brought back any of the old food," said David Binkle, deputy director of food services. "We're sticking to it."

### **Kitchens not up to scratch**

It's lunchtime at McKinley Elementary School in San Diego, and an industrial four-burner stove sits idle in the middle of the kitchen. There are no cutting boards or pots in sight. Instead, workers bustle between the

refrigerator, oven and food-warming box, preparing trays of reheated frozen foods.

Like many districts in the state, the San Diego Unified School District doesn't have the equipment or staff to cook meals from scratch. While the district serves fruits and vegetables daily, it failed to meet some nutritional standards in its state review five years ago, missing calorie thresholds and exceeding fat and sodium targets.

Many districts mirror San Diego's reliance on processed food. About 72 percent of California high schools serve reheated processed meals more than half the time, according to recent research by Woodward-Lopez. Shifting to more fresh vegetables and fruits and healthier preparation techniques will require sinks, steamers and other equipment that schools don't have and can't afford.

Discussions about serving healthier fare often boil down to money. Many districts operate their lunch programs at a loss and say the national reimbursement rate of \$2.77 per free meal served is not enough.

School officials laud recent changes that will provide an additional 6 cents per lunch for schools that meet new nutritional standards. But many say the increase won't cover the cost of required fruits and vegetables. In San Diego, for example, an average fruit serving costs 18 to 20 cents.

Then there's the issue of time. Children often struggle to finish their meals during lunch periods. A 2011 survey by the School Nutrition Association showed the median lunch period in American elementary schools is 25 minutes. The median period at middle and high schools is 30 minutes.

Julia Lester, a Woodland Hills middle school student, gave up eating in the cafeteria at her last school because the lines were too long.

“Some days, the bell would ring while I was still in line,” said Julia, a seventh-grader at Hale Charter Academy. “I would go hungry.”

## **Fighting for changes**

Aside from money, one of the biggest factors driving lunch food is school leadership.

“The food service director plays a huge role, in terms of their outlook, passion and willingness to take risks,” said Kathy Lawrence of New York-based **School Food FOCUS**. The organization helps large districts buy healthier, more sustainable and regionally sourced foods.

But there are limits to how much food service directors can change student eating habits. Directors who seek healthier food often struggle to get buy-in from their administration. Several directors interviewed said they wanted to invest in cooking equipment for healthier meals but couldn’t get the money or space.

These obstacles often mean progress is incremental. Instead of overhauling their menus, districts might shift to whole-wheat hamburger buns or fat-free salad dressings.

Those are the types of changes taking place at the Wheatland School District. In the district’s review four years ago, Food Services Director Karen Willis said her salad bar featured brownies, egg salad and tuna salad. Now, her salad bar serves only vegetables and fruits. She has switched to fat-free and low-fat options and whole-grain pastas.

But Willis said she’s certain her next review will not be perfect.

“They’re going to find something,” said Willis, who has a staff of three to feed about 1,000 students daily. “I’m doing the best I can.”

*California Watch Staff writer Agustin Armendariz and intern Anika Anand contributed to this report. This story was edited by Denise Zapata. It was copy edited by Nikki Frick and Christine Lee.*

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