

California High School Fast Food Survey

2003

Findings & Recommendations

Commissioned by Public Health Institute • Oakland, California

The 2003 California High School Fast Food Survey

**Commissioned by
Public Health Institute**

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Executive Summary

Background

Nationally, the issue of school food and its contribution to rising rates of childhood obesity has gained prominence.

In 1999, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) and the Public Health Institute (PHI) recognized the growing problem of unhealthy foods on California high school campuses. Using funds from The California Endowment, PHI commissioned Samuels & Associates to work with California Project LEAN to research this issue. This research included a survey in which district food service directors were asked about the prevalence of fast foods on California high school campuses. The results of the *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey* described the types of fast food sold on California high school campuses, the factors that influenced such sales, and the associated economic and policy issues (Craypo et al, Journal of School Health, January 2002). The findings showed that 90 percent of the school districts (containing high schools) surveyed sold fast foods as a la carte items. Many districts sold brand-name products such as Taco Bell, Domino's, and Subway. Profits generated from a la carte food sales helped to support food service operations and other school related activities (Samuels & Associates, California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations; Public Health Institute, February 2000).

In January 2001, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II. This study found that national School Lunch Program (NSLP) meals improved during the 1990s with statistically significant trends toward decreased levels of total fat and saturated fat. Children who participate in the NSLP are more likely than non-participants to consume vegetables, milk, and protein-rich foods at lunch and over a 24 hour period; they also consume less soda and fruit drinks (Fox, 2001). However, high school students have typically low participation in the NSLP, so they do not experience the benefits school meals can provide.

At the same time, high school students have increased their consumption of a la carte foods that are not part of the school meal program and are not subject to nutrient standards. Strong social and financial factors have motivated schools to sell an increasing volume of a la carte foods over the past decade. School food service programs, which are forced to operate as financially independent businesses (School Food Finance Survey: Samuels & Associates, 2001), are staying afloat by selling a la carte fast foods that are relatively high in fat, added sugars, and calories (USDA, 2001). This increase in sales of a la carte foods has been accompanied by a decrease in sales of NSLP meals. Although a la carte sales produce substantial revenues, declining NSLP participation results in decreased cash and commodity support from the USDA. This reduction in Federal support is a disincentive to schools to maintain quality school meal programs that adhere to nutrient standards (USDA, 2001).

Methods

The purpose of the *2003 California High School Fast Food Survey* was to gather a second set of information that describes the forces which shape the environment in which California high school students make food choices.

Specifically, the 2003 survey:

- Assesses the factors that influence fast food sales on high school campuses.
- Identifies current nutritional standards applied to the sale of competitive foods.
- Determines the role food service directors play in selecting foods sold and in managing funds generated from the sale of a la carte foods.
- Highlights unique issues for schools with 50 percent or more of the students eligible for free or reduced price meals.
- Identifies the feasibility of implementing nutrition standards for a la carte foods.

For the latest study, a self-administered survey instrument was created and pre-tested with a small sample of food service directors. The survey instrument included 26 multiple choice and 13 open-ended questions. A number of new questions were developed for the 2003 survey; others had been asked previously on the 2000 survey.

The self-administered survey was mailed to all public school food service directors in California who had at least one high school in their district (n=413) in June 2001. To enhance the survey response rate, three mailings were conducted. Follow-up phone calls were made to a random sample of 50 non-respondents.

Findings

One hundred seventy-three (173) school districts completed the survey, yielding a 42 percent response rate. Responding districts represent 438 high schools with 661,115 students which is 39 percent of California's high school students (grades 9-12). Within the responding districts, sixty-seven percent of the schools have overall student participation rates in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) of below 50 percent. Participation rates were slightly higher in low-income schools (those with 50 percent or more of the student population eligible for free or reduced price NSLP meals). NSLP participation was lower on open campuses which allow students to leave campus at lunch.

A significant portion of overall food service operating budgets is generated by a la carte food sales, including sales from vending machines. At 63 percent of the responding districts, a la carte items like pizza, chips, cookies, fruit, and soda generated up to 60 percent of food service operating budgets.

Fewer districts in the current survey than in 2000 reported selling brand name fast food items. However, the number of districts that rely on sales of school district branded fast foods increased from 14 percent in the 2000 survey to 24 percent in the current survey. The most frequently reported brands sold through food service were Coke (36 percent), Pepsi (32 percent), Taco Bell (26 percent), Domino's Pizza (25 percent), and school district brands (24 percent).

Many districts reported selling a la carte items on their high school campuses. The most frequent items were chips (75 percent), pizza (73 percent), cookies (72 percent), and soda (71 percent). With the exception of fruit (72 percent), healthy items, like yogurt (66 percent), bagels (62 percent), and packaged salads (60 percent) were less common. Only 13 percent of school districts reported modifying more than 50 percent of their a la carte items to the nutritional content. Pizza was the most common item to be modified.

Eighteen percent of districts reported contracting promotion rights to fast food or beverages companies. Districts with those agreements reported advertising on school facilities and equipment (63 percent) and sponsorship of school events and activities (47 percent).

Food sales by groups other than food service were common. Seventy-four percent of districts reported that student clubs sold food during meal times; other organizers of food sales included booster clubs (33 percent), Parent Teacher Association (PTA) (31 percent), and physical education (PE) departments (31 percent).

The current survey asked food service directors about their ability to comply with nutrient standards for a la carte foods. Overall, the most common changes required to meet nutrient standards were (1) modification of the types of products sold, and (2) modification of the existing food inventory. Changes with a large fiscal impact such as increasing the food service budget, improving kitchen facilities, and adding staff were cited by less than a third of districts.

Conclusions

Fast foods continue to be a staple on California high school campuses. Significant consideration needs to be given to the impact that unhealthy foods and beverages have on the diets of teens now, and on the life-long eating habits they will develop. Food service directors continue to be hard-pressed to find a balance between providing adolescents with healthy food and beverage choices that meet students' nutritional needs, satisfy their student customers, and run a financially stable business. The following recommendations for student health are made:

- Eliminate the sale of foods and beverages that do not meet state nutrient standards. Instead, identify and promote healthy options that are popular with students.
- Provide financial and technical assistance resources to school districts to enable them to increase the provision and sale of healthy a la carte items.
- Fund research to identify successful sales strategies that minimize the financial impact of implementing a la carte food standards.
- Encourage increased participation in the NSLP at all high schools.
- Identify ways to work with vendors to increase the availability of foods that meet nutrient standards at reasonable prices.
- Support student activities at appropriate funding levels to reduce the reliance on funds generated by sales of unhealthy foods.
- Give food services control over all food sales on campus to decrease competition.

- Eliminate exclusive contracts with food and beverage vendors in order to decrease unhealthy food/beverage advertising at school and to give school districts more control over the types of foods and beverages sold at school.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the *2003 California High School Fast Food Survey* was to gather a second set of information that describes the forces which shape the environment in which California high school students make food choices. The 2003 survey provides further documentation on the trends in fast food sales in public high schools across California. The primary research objectives were to (1) determine the extent of fast food sales on high school campuses, and (2) identify new issues that were not described by the initial *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey*.

Specifically, the 2003 survey:

- Assesses the factors that influence fast food sales on high school campuses.
- Identifies current nutritional standards applied to the sale of competitive foods.
- Determines the role food service directors play in selecting foods sold and in managing funds generated from the sale of a la carte foods.
- Highlights unique issues for schools with 50 percent or more of the students eligible for free or reduced price meals.
- Identifies the feasibility of implementing nutrition standards for a la carte foods.

BACKGROUND

In 1999, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) and the Public Health Institute (PHI) recognized the growing problem of unhealthy foods on California high school campuses. Using funds from The California Endowment, PHI commissioned Samuels & Associates to work with California Project LEAN to research this issue. This research included a survey in which district food service directors were asked about the prevalence of fast foods on California high school campuses. The results of the *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey* described the types of fast food sold on California high school campuses, the factors that influenced such sales, and the associated economic and policy issues (Craypo et al, Journal of School Health, January 2002). The findings showed that 90 percent of the school districts surveyed sold fast foods as a la carte items. Many districts sold brand-name products such as Taco Bell, Domino's, and Subway. Profits generated from a la carte food sales helped to support food service operations and other school related activities (Samuels & Associates, California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations; Public Health Institute, February 2000).

In light of national concern about rising rates of childhood obesity, the findings from the 2000 survey generated an interest in state and local policies that influence access to unhealthy food choices at school. As a result, a number of efforts were undertaken in California to address the sale of unhealthy foods at school. Efforts included a statewide summit on nutrition and physical activity in school, a policymakers summit on childhood obesity, and successful state legislation to set nutrient standards for a la carte foods sold on school campuses.

Nationally, the issue of school food and its contribution to rising rates of childhood obesity has gained prominence. In January 2001, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

released the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II. This study found that national School Lunch Program (NSLP) meals improved during the 1990s with statistically significant trends toward decreased levels of total fat and saturated fat. Children who participate in the NSLP are more likely than non-participants to consume vegetables, milk, and protein-rich foods at lunch and over a 24 hour period; they also consume less soda and fruit drinks (Fox, 2001). However, high school students have typically low participation in the NSLP; therefore, they do not experience the benefits school meals can provide.

At the same time, high school students have increased their consumption of a la carte foods that are not part of the school meal program and are not subject to nutrient standards. Strong social and financial factors have motivated schools to sell an increasing volume of a la carte foods over the past decade. School food service programs, which are forced to operate as financially independent businesses (School Food Finance Survey: Samuels & Associates, 2001), are staying afloat by selling a la carte fast foods that are relatively high in fat, added sugars, and calories (USDA, 2001). This increase in sales of a la carte foods has been accompanied by a decrease in sales of NSLP meals. Although a la carte sales produce substantial revenues, declining NSLP participation results in decreased cash and commodity support from the USDA. This reduction in federal support is a disincentive to schools to maintain quality school meal programs that adhere to nutrient standards (USDA, 2001).

Sales of a la carte fast foods send a mixed and confusing message to students and undermine classroom education. When children are taught about healthy eating in the classroom, but are surrounded by low nutrient dense food choices in snack bars, vending machines, student stores, and a la carte lines, they receive the message that good nutrition is not supported by the school administration and not important to their health (USDA, 2001).

TERMINOLOGY

The following terms are used in this report:

Fast Foods: These include a wide variety of foods such as popular entrees like pizza and tacos, as well as items such as cookies, chips, and pastries. Fast foods are classified as branded and non-branded items.

Branded Foods: Items sold under a recognized retail brand name such as Domino's Pizza or Taco Bell.

School branded foods: Some school districts develop their own "branding" for food items. The branding is designed to appeal to students and may include logos, special packaging, special sales locations, and special advertising campaigns.

Non-branded Foods: Generic items that are not sold under a brand name.

Food Service: The department within the school district or school that operates the school breakfast and/or lunch program. This includes the operation of the NSLP. The Food Service Department also may be referred to as the Child Nutrition Program.

National School Lunch Program (NSLP): This program, administered by the USDA, in cooperation with state and local education agencies, subsidizes the cost of preparing and serving meals at participating schools. The NSLP assures that lunch is available to all students at participating schools and that the meals meet specific nutritional requirements.

Free or Reduced-Price Meals: Students are eligible for a free NSLP meal if their family income is 130 percent of the federal poverty level or below. Students are eligible for a reduced price NSLP meal if their family income is between 130 percent and 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Students who do not meet the family income requirements for free or reduced price meals are allowed to purchase the NSLP meal at full price. Districts may offer breakfast and/or lunch as part of the NSLP.

A La Carte: Foods sold individually and not as part of a complete NSLP meal. A la carte items are exempt from the dietary guidelines to which the NSLP meals must adhere. A la carte items may include fast foods.

Open Campus: On an open campus, students are allowed to leave during break periods and lunch.

Closed Campus: A closed campus does not allow students to leave during the school day.

METHODS

A self-administered survey instrument was created and pre-tested with a small sample of food service directors. The survey instrument included 26 multiple choice and 13 open-ended questions. A number of new questions were developed for the 2003 survey; others had been asked previously on the 2000 survey.

The self-administered survey was mailed to all public school food service directors in California who had at least one high school in their district ($n=413$) in June 2001. To enhance the survey response rate, three mailings were conducted. Follow-up phone calls were made to a random sample of 50 non-respondents. One hundred seventy-three (173) school districts completed the survey, yielding a 42 percent response rate. Responding districts represent 438 high schools with 661,115 students which is 39 percent of California's high school students (grades 9-12). Survey data were cleaned, entered, and frequencies calculated using *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) by WestEd, a survey research firm specializing in educational research. The following analysis is based on the 173 responses.

SURVEY LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this survey should take into account the following study limitations:

- The survey uses only self-reported data.
- A validity study was not conducted with the survey instrument.
- Response to the survey was on a voluntary basis.
- The authors did not collect information on the non-respondents and do not know how their responses would have differed from the surveys completed.
- The survey sample is not representative of all California districts and therefore is not able to be generalized to all district and/or high schools.
- Statistical comparisons cannot be made between the 2000 and 2003 surveys, although it is possible to make statements about data trends.

SURVEY FINDINGS

A. PROFILE OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Respondents represented a range of school districts around the state (Table A-1). However, the majority of responding districts (66 percent) contained one or two high schools and thus can be classified as small. One-quarter (26 percent) were medium-sized school districts with 3-5 high schools and 7 percent were large districts with six or more high schools, including one district with 20 high schools.

Table A-1: Number of High Schools in District
(N=173 school districts)

Number of High Schools in District	Responding Districts	Percent
1	69	40
2	45	26
3	18	10
4	17	10
5	10	6
6	5	3
7 or more	7	4
Missing	2	1

Campus Status: Open or Closed

Respondents were asked to report if the high schools in their district had open or closed campuses (Table A-2). Open campuses can pose a problem for food service programs because those programs can experience competition from food vendors located in neighborhoods surrounding the schools. Schools also are concerned about students leaving campus during the lunchtime. For safety and accountability reasons, some districts have closed their campuses and require students to stay on the campus for the entire school day. Respondents answering this question indicated that 53 percent of their high schools have closed campuses, and 46 percent have open campuses.

Table A-2: Open or Closed Campus
(N=320 high schools)

Open/Closed Campuses	Schools	Percent
Closed	170	53
Open	148	46
Missing	2	1

Percentage of Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Priced Meals

Students are eligible for a free NSLP meal if their family income is at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level. Students are eligible for reduced-price NSLP meals if their family income is between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Previous studies have found that students from poor households are more likely to participate in the school meal program and not to purchase a la carte foods. Table A-3 shows that the majority (68 percent) of districts responding to this question reported that up to 49 percent of the students at their high schools are eligible for free and reduced price NSLP meals; at 22 percent of the high schools between 50-69 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced price meals; and at 10 percent of the high schools 70-100 percent of the student body are eligible for free and reduced price meals.

Table A-3: Percentage of Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Priced Meals
(N=320 high schools)

Percentage of eligible students	Schools	Percent
0–49%	217	68
50–69%	70	22
70–100%	33	10

Participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)

Meals served as part of the NSLP must adhere to nutritional requirements that reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (Federal Register, June 1995). However, because participation in the NSLP is often low at the high school level, students often do not benefit from these healthier meals. Rather, students often purchase a la carte foods that are not subject to nutritional requirements. Survey respondents were queried as to overall student participation in the NSLP at each high school in their district. Among the districts responding to this question, sixty-seven percent of schools have overall student participation rates below 50 percent. Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of schools have student participation rates ranging from 50 percent to 69 percent, and only 8 percent of high schools have a 70 percent participation rate or higher (Table A-4).

Table A-4: Student Participation in the National School Lunch Program
(N=320 high schools)

Student Participation Rate in NSLP	Schools	Percent
0–49%	213	67
50–69%	74	23
70–100%	27	8
Missing	6	2

One important factor influencing participation in the NSLP appears to be the existence of a closed campus. Among the responding districts with the highest NSLP participation rates

(70-100 percent), schools with a closed campus (12 percent) were more common than schools with an open campus (5 percent). But this difference in campus type disappeared as NSLP participation decreased (Table A-5).

Table A-5: Participation in the NSLP—Open vs. Closed Campuses

Student Participation Rate in NSLP	OPEN CAMPUS		CLOSED CAMPUS	
	Schools N = 144**	Percent	Schools N = 163**	Percent
0% - 49%	102	71	107	65
50% - 69%	35	24	37	23
70% - 100%	7	5	19	12

** 13 schools had missing data for analysis of this question

Participation rates are slightly higher in low-income schools (those with 50 percent or more of the student population eligible for free and reduced priced meals). The responding districts represent 103 low-income high schools (Table A-3). In low-income schools, NSLP participation rates are higher than the general population of schools. Forty-two percent have participation rates above 50 percent (Table A-6) compared to 31 percent for the total school population (Table A-4). However, even in the low-income schools, over half (55 percent) report NSLP participation rates below 50 percent (Table A-6).

Table A-6: Participation in the NSLP for Low-income High Schools

(N=103 high schools)

Participation in the NSLP at Low-income High Schools	Schools	Percent
0%–49%	57	55
50%–69%	30	29
70%–100%	13	13
Missing	3	3

B. SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE FINANCES

A series of questions were asked about the food service budget and how a la carte food sales contribute to the overall budget. Many school districts depend on the resources generated from the sale of a la carte foods to support food service and other school-wide activities and programs.

Financial Goal of Food Service

Half of the responding districts (50 percent) indicated that the financial goal of the food service department was to break even and cover the costs of food service operations. Yet, nearly 41 percent responded that their goal was to make a profit and maintain a financial reserve (Table B-1).

Table B-1: Financial Goal of Food Service (N= 173 districts)

Financial Goal	Responding Districts	Percent
Break even and cover costs	87	50
Make a profit and maintain a reserve	71	41
Other	3	2
Missing	12	7

Overall Operating Budget

School food service departments are run as businesses with an operating budget and financial goals. Forty-three percent of the school districts responding to this survey managed operating budgets over \$10 million dollars annually (Table B-2).

Table B-2: Overall operating Budget (N=173 districts)

Operating Budget	Responding Districts	Percent
Below \$500,000	11	6
\$500,000–\$999,000	10	6
\$1,000,000–\$5,000,000	20	11
\$5,000,001–\$10,000,000	22	13
Over \$ 10,000,000	74	43
Don't Know	3	2
Missing	33	19

Percentage of Food Service Operating Budget Generated From A La Carte Food Sales

The food service directors were asked what percent of their overall operating budget is generated through a la carte food sales, including sales from vending machines operated by food service. Almost half of the districts (47 percent) generated 30 percent or more of their budget from a la carte food sales (Table B-3).

Table B-3: Food Service Operating Budget From A La Carte Food Sales (N=173)

A La Carte Food Sales	Responding Districts	Percent
0-29% of budget	51	29
30-59% of budget	58	34
60% and above	23	13
Missing	41	24

Food Service Expenses

Food purchases and labor costs account for the largest portion of the food service budget. Almost three quarters (71 percent) of the respondents spend thirty to sixty percent of their operating budget on food purchases and 62 percent spend thirty to sixty percent of their budget on labor. Most districts report spending less than 30 percent of their budget on equipment, non-food items, and indirect costs (Table B-4).

Table B-4: Food Service Expenses
(N=173 districts)

Item	Less than 30% of budget		30% to 60% of budget		Over 60% of budget	
	Districts	Percent	Districts	Percent	Districts	Percent
Food purchases	5	3	123	71	5	3
Labor	19	11	108	62	5	3
Equipment	112	65	2	1	1	1
Non-food items (plates, napkins, etc.)	116	67	0	0	0	0
Indirect costs	86	50	0	0	0	0
Other	32	18	1	1	0	0

Food Service Directors' Authority

Food service directors were asked how much control they have over the food service budget and spending. Respondents were given several choices with which to describe their level of control:

- Total Control–no approvals needed other than school board
- Almost Total Control–food service director develops the budget and the school business office has final approval
- Shared Control–food service director works with the school business office to develop the budget
- Little Control–school business office develops the budget with input from the food service director
- No Control–school business office develops the budget without input from food service

The amount of control food service directors have over the food service budget and spending varies by district. Among the respondents, 16 percent have total control over the food service budget, while 35 percent have almost total control, and 21 percent have shared control. Eleven percent reported having little or no control (Table B-5).

Table B-5: Food Service Directors Authority
(N=173 respondents)

Control Level	Responding Districts	Percent
Total control	28	16
Almost total control	61	35
Shared control	37	21
Little control	10	6
No control	8	5
Other	2	1
Don't know	2	1
Missing	25	15

C. CURRENT A LA CARTE FOOD ITEMS

Similar to the 2000 survey, a series of questions were asked about current a la carte food sales. A la carte foods were defined as branded and non-branded. The brands and food items included in the 2003 survey were developed from the responses to the 2000 survey.

Fast Food and Beverage Brands

School districts sell a variety of branded a la carte items on high school campuses. Table C-1 shows that the most frequently reported food brands were Taco Bell (26 percent), Domino's Pizza (25 percent), and Subway (18 percent). Coke (36 percent) and Pepsi (32 percent) were the most frequently mentioned beverage brands and the most frequently reported brands overall. Twenty-four percent of the districts sell their own school brand and 12 percent of the districts reported selling other brands not identified on the survey list. Only 10 districts (6 percent) reported that they do not sell branded a la carte items.

Compared to responses to the 2000 survey, the top brands were the same. However, fewer districts responding in 2003 relied on these name brands. In 2000, over 53 percent of respondents mentioned Taco Bell as an a la carte item compared with 26 percent in 2003; Subway declined from 22 percent to 18 percent. Domino's Pizza was the only top brand to see an increase from 19 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2003. The number of responding districts that rely on sales of school district branded foods increased to 24 percent in 2003 as compared to 14 percent in 2000.

Table C-1: Fast Food Brands (N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

A La Carte Items Sold	Responding Districts	Percent
Coke	63	36
Pepsi	56	32
Taco Bell	46	26
Domino's	44	25
School district branded foods	41	24
Other pizza brands	32	18
Subway	31	18
Pizza Hut	23	13
Other	20	12
Round Table Pizza	16	9
Don't sell a la carte items in high school	11	6
Don't sell branded a la carte items	10	6
McDonald's	7	4
Burger King	6	4
Kentucky Fried Chicken	5	3
Don't know	1	1

Food service directors were asked open-ended questions about their reactions to branded a la carte food sales and expressed mixed feelings about selling branded a la carte items on high school campuses. Many did not feel comfortable selling these foods because they feel the foods are of lower nutritional quality. Responding directors felt compelled to sell branded a la carte foods to keep their food service department operating in the black. Other respondents felt that

branded fast foods have lower student and teacher acceptance than foods prepared in-house and that the slim profit margin for these foods does not justify their sale. Another group of respondents would like to reduce or eliminate sales of branded foods. One district reported doubling the price of branded fast foods to deter students from buying these foods.

A La Carte Items

Many foods are sold as a la carte items on high school campuses. Seventy-five percent of responding districts reported selling chips, 73 percent sell pizza, 72 percent sell cookies, and 71 percent sell burritos. These items are similar to the a la carte items most frequently identified in the 2000 survey. Among beverages sold a la carte, soda was reported by 71 percent of the districts, sports drinks by 67 percent, and ice tea by 47 percent of districts (Table C-2).

Table C-2: A La Carte Items

(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Items	Responding Districts	Percent
Chips	129	75
Pizza	127	73
Cookies	125	72
Soda (Pepsi, Coke included)	122	71
Burritos	123	71
Hamburgers	119	69
Nachos	116	67
Sport drinks	116	67
Ice cream	113	65
Sub sandwiches	111	64
Fried chicken (sandwich/nuggets)	95	55
Cinnamon rolls	95	55
Corn dogs	91	53
Donuts	86	50
Pastries	82	47
Iced tea	81	47
French fries (fried not baked)	73	42
Hot dogs	73	42
Tacos	64	37
Taquitos	36	21
Fried fish (sandwich/nuggets)	28	16
Other	18	10
Don't sell a la carte items	10	6

Healthy A La Carte Choices

Districts also are selling healthier choices as a la carte food items (Table C-3). Among responding districts, 72 percent sell fruit, 66 percent sell yogurt, 62 percent sell bagels, 60 percent sell packaged salads, 51 percent sell wrap sandwiches and 48 percent sell raw vegetables. Almost one third (30 percent) sell smoothies.

Table C-3: Healthy A la Carte Items

(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Item	Responding Districts	Percent
Fruit	124	72
Yogurt	114	66
Bagels	108	62
Packaged salads	103	60
Wrap sandwiches	88	51
Raw vegetables	83	48
Rice bowls	56	32
Smoothies	51	30
Don't sell a la carte items	10	6
Other	4	2
Don't know	1	1

Modified A La Carte Foods

Many districts modify a la carte food items to meet current Dietary Guidelines. Almost half of respondents (46 percent) reported that their district sells a la carte items modified to be low fat (no more than 30 percent of calories from fat) or to provide more fruits, vegetables, or fiber (Table C-4). Pizza made with low fat cheese is an example of a modified item.

Table C-4: District modified a la carte items (N=173 districts)

A La Carte Item Modified	Responding Districts	Percent
Yes	79	46
No	63	36
Don't know	8	5
Missing	23	13

Table C-5 shows that among respondents indicating that they modify a la carte food items to improve their nutrient content, almost half (49 percent) reported modifying less than a quarter of the a la carte foods sold. Over one third modify between 25 percent and 50 percent of their a la carte items, and 13 percent of respondents modify over 50 percent of their a la carte items.

Table C-5: Percentage of A La Carte Items Modified to Improve Nutritional Content (N=79 districts)

Amount of Food Modified	Responding Districts	Percent
Less than 25% of a la carte modified	39	49
25% to 50% of a la carte modified	28	35
Greater than 50% of a la carte modified	10	13
Missing	2	3

Table C-6 lists the eleven foods most commonly modified by the respondents.

Table C-6: Percentage of A La Carte Items Modified

(N= 79 districts; Respondents selected all that apply.)

A La Carte Item	Number of Districts Modifying the Item	Percent
Pizza	47	59
Hamburgers	45	57
Burritos	41	52
Packaged salads	39	49
French fries	39	49
Hot dogs	32	41
Sub-sandwiches	32	41
Tacos	28	35
Corn dogs	26	33
Wrap sandwiches	24	30
Rice bowls	21	27

Table C-7 indicates that traditional a la carte foods are modified to decrease fat content, including pizza (47 percent), hamburgers (32 percent), and corn dogs (30 percent).

Table C-7: Within Districts that Modify A La Carte Items, the Percentage of A La Carte Items Modified to be Low Fat (no more than 30% of calories from fat)

(N=79 districts; Respondents selected all that apply.)

A La Carte Item	Number of Districts Modifying Items to be Low Fat	Percent
Pizza	37	47
Hamburgers	25	32
Corn dogs	24	30
Sub-sandwiches	23	29
Hot dogs	21	27
Packaged salads	20	25
Burritos	18	23
French fries	17	22
Wrap sandwiches	17	22
Rice bowls	16	20
Tacos	11	14

A La Carte Food Sales Profits

School districts use the profits generated from a la carte food sales for a variety of school activities. Seventy percent use profits to support child nutrition operations. Thirty percent use these funds for facilities and equipment improvements and maintenance. Twenty percent of the responding school districts use the profits from a la carte food sales to support extracurricular activities, such as band and orchestra, and seventeen percent use these funds for the athletic department (Table C-8).

Table C-8: Usage of A La Carte Food Sale Profits
(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Use of A La Carte Sales	Responding Districts	Percent
Supports Child Nutrition operations	121	70
Supports facilities, equipment, and maintenance	52	30
Supports extracurricular activities (i.e. band, orchestra, associated student body)	35	20
Supports the athletic department	29	17
Supports expanded educational programs	20	12
Don't sell a la carte items	10	6
Other	8	5
Don't know	1	1

Food and Beverage Advertisements on School Campuses

The most common fast food or beverage advertisement found on the high school campuses in responding districts are ads on vending machines (48 percent), scoreboards or signs (31 percent), and posters (23 percent). Ads on vending machines seem more prevalent than during the 2000 survey. There was a notable increase from 3 percent of responding districts in 2000 compared to 48 percent in 2003 (Table C-9).

Table C-9: Food and Beverage Advertisements on School Campuses

(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Types of Advertisement	Responding Districts	Percent
Ads on vending machines	83	48
Ads on scoreboards or signs	53	31
Posters	39	23
Ads on equipment	30	17
Don't know	17	10
Ads in the school paper	11	6
Advertising not allowed on campus	11	6
Other	5	3
Ads on the school television system (in house channel or Ch.1)	1	1

Promotion Rights

Table C-10 shows that 18 percent of the responding districts had contracted promotion rights to “fast food” or beverage companies, while over half (53 percent) of the districts indicated that they had not.

Table C-10: Promotion Rights (N=173 districts)

Promotion Rights	Responding Districts	Percent
No	91	53
Yes	32	18
Don't know	8	5
Missing	42	24

Among those that had contracted for promotion rights, 62 percent had product and/or brand names on school facilities or equipment and 47 percent had sponsorship of school events and activities (Table C-11). These results were similar to the 2000 survey findings.

Table C-11: Promotion Types

(N=32 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Promotion Types	Responding Districts	Percent
Product and/or brand names on school facilities or equipment	20	63
Sponsorship of school events and activities	15	47
Other	4	13
Retail coupons	3	9
Food tasting	2	6
Don't know	2	6

School Fundraisers

School fundraisers for essential activities such as athletics, student clubs, and student government often involve the sale of food or soda. Fundraising food sales are a concern because they directly compete with the food service department for student dollars, and fundraising foods are usually not subject to any nutrient regulations. Food service directors were asked, aside from the food service department, what other school-related organizations sell food on high school campuses during meal times. Seventy-four percent of respondents said that student clubs sell food during meal times. Other groups selling food at meal times include booster clubs (33 percent), PTA (31 percent), and physical activity department (28 percent). Seventeen percent of responding districts reported that only the food service sells food during meal times (Table C-12).

Table C-12: School Fundraisers

(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Fundraisers	Responding Districts	Percent
Student Clubs	128	74
Booster Clubs	57	33
PTA	54	31
PE Department	49	28
Only Food Service	30	17
Other	10	6
Don't Know	5	3

School districts with entities other than the food service department selling food during meal times (n=156) were asked if the food service department provides the foods used for fundraising. Table C-13 shows that in a small number of districts (8 percent), food service provides the foods that other school groups use for fundraising activities. For most districts (69 percent), food service does not provide the food sold for school fundraisers.

Table C-13: Food Service Provision of Food for School Fundraiser Sales
(N=156 districts)

Does Food Service Provide the Food?	Responding Districts	Percent
No (never or rarely)	108	69
Yes (some or most of the time)	12	8
Don't know	1	1
Missing	35	22

Food service directors were asked if any part of their departmental budget (local income) is used to support district programs that are outside of the food service. Few food service directors (15 percent) provide financial support for programs outside of the food service (Table C-14).

Table C-14: Food Service Budget (Local Income) Support of Programs Outside of Food Service (N=173 districts)

Does the Food Service Budget Support Programs Outside of Food Service?	Responding Districts	Percent
No	126	73
Yes	26	15
Don't know	4	2
Missing	17	10

The food service directors who provide income support for programs outside of food service were asked opened-ended questions that probed budgetary breakdowns and the types of programs supported. Estimates of the percentage of the food service budget supporting programs outside of food service ranged from 2 to 25 percent. Respondents described partnerships in which profits are shared between the food service department and a student group. In these partnerships, students provide the labor for food sales (a number of respondents specifically mentioned pizza and soda sales) in exchange for a percentage of the profits. Respondents also described partnerships where a percentage of funds generated through daily snack bar or soda sales go to the school principal. Other profit sharing arrangements were described and include the following:

- Food service funds are used to support a variety of programs including special education, physical education, arts, student associations, student clubs, student leadership team, scholarships, Special Olympics, and special events.
- Vending machine sales support programs outside the food service including the Associated Student Body and other individual school site activities.
- Students raise funds by selling food from carts provided by the food service. Students retain all or some of the dollars earned from the food carte sales minus expenses.

D. NUTRIENT STANDARDS FOR A LA CARTE FOODS

Legislation was introduced in the 2000-2001 California Senate to set nutrient standards for a la carte food items sold on all school campuses. The nutrient standards included in the original bill (SB 19) (Chapter 913, Statutes of 2001, Pupil Nutrition, Health and Achievement Act of 2001) were established by a consensus panel of nutrition and child health experts (California Center for Public Health Advocacy, 2000). The legislation was amended, passed, and ultimately signed by

the Governor in Fall 2001. The standards will go into effect when funds for increased NSLP meal reimbursement are allocated in the state budget and approved by the Governor. While the enacted nutrient standards will primarily apply to elementary schools, the original standards were intended to apply to all a la carte foods sold on all school campuses, including those items sold by groups other than food service. District food service directors were asked how the following nutrient standards, if applied to high schools, would affect their current food service operations.

Beverages

The food service directors were asked what they would need to do to meet the following standard for all beverages sold on campus.

BEVERAGE STANDARD

The maximum portion size for all beverages is 12 oz, except for milk and water. Only non-carbonated beverages could be sold on school campuses. These include:

- Fruit-based drinks that do not contain added sweeteners.
- Water.
- Milk, including chocolate milk, soy milk, rice milk, and other nondairy milk.
- Other beverages (i.e. Sports Drinks) that contain no more than 25 grams of sweetener and no more than 25 milligrams of caffeine.

Table D-1 shows that 79 percent of respondents indicated that food service would need to change the types of products sold, 66 percent said that they would need to change their existing food inventory, and 50 percent said they would need to find new vendors. Over one quarter of responding districts (28 percent) answered that the food service budget would need to increase. Estimates on the magnitude of this increase ranged from \$3,500–\$500,000. Five percent of districts reported that they are already meeting this standard.

Table D-1: Changes of Food Service Operations—Beverages

(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Food Service Changes	Responding Districts	Percent
Change types of products sold	136	79
Change existing food inventory	115	66
Find new vendors	87	50
Increase food service budget	48	28
Other	26	15
Improve kitchen facilities	20	12
Obtain technical assistance	12	7
Increase food service staff	11	6
Don't sell a la carte foods in high schools	10	6
Already meet standard	8	5
Don't know	4	2

Snacks, Sweets, and Side Dishes

Food service directors were asked what they would need to implement this standard for snacks, sweets, and side dishes (excluding fruits and vegetables).

SNACKS, SWEETS, AND SIDE DISHES STANDARD

Snacks, sweets and side dishes must contain:

- 35% or less of total calories from fat (excluding nuts and seeds).
- 10% or less of total calories from saturated fat.
- 35% or less of weight from sugar.

Table D-2 show that 72 percent of responding districts would need to change the types of products sold, 66 percent would need to change their existing food inventory, 47 percent would need to find new food vendors, and one third (33 percent) would need to increase their food service budget between 10 percent and 80 percent. Seventeen percent reported that they would have to improve their kitchen facilities in order to meet this standard. Eight of the responding districts (5 percent) reported that they already met this standard.

Table D-2: Changes of Food Service Operations—Snacks, Sweets and Side Dishes
(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Food Service Changes	Responding Districts	Percent
Change types of products sold	124	72
Change existing food inventory	114	66
Find new vendors	81	47
Increase food service budget	57	33
Improve kitchen facilities	29	17
Obtain technical assistance	15	9
Increase food service staff	13	8
Other	14	8
Don't sell a la carte foods in high school	10	6
Already meet standard	8	5
Don't know	4	2

Serving Size for A La Carte Entrée Items and Side Dishes

Food service directors were asked what they would need in order to implement the following standard for entrees and side dishes.

ENTRÉE ITEMS AND SIDE DISHES SERVING SIZE STANDARD

Entrée items and side dishes, including, but not limited to, French fries and onion rings, shall be no larger than the portions of those foods served as part of the federal school meal program.

This standard is already implemented in 26 percent of the responding districts. Thirty-four percent of the food service directors indicated that they would need to change the types of products sold, 26 percent would need to change their food inventory, and 22 percent would need to find new food vendors (Table D-3).

Table D-3: Changes of Food Service Operations—Entrée items and side dishes
(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Food Service Changes	Responding Districts	Percent
Change types of products sold	59	34
Change food inventory	45	26
Already meet standard	45	26
Find new vendors	39	23
Increase food service budget	23	13
Other	21	12
Increase food service staff	17	10
Don't know	12	7
Improve kitchen facilities	11	6
Don't sell a la carte foods in high school	10	6
Obtain technical assistance	6	3

Fruits and Vegetables

Food service directors were asked to comment on this standard designed to increase accessibility of fruits and vegetables.

FRUITS AND VEGETABLES STANDARD

Fruits and vegetables shall be offered for sale at any location on the school site of a secondary school where competitive foods are sold.

In Table D-4, over one in five respondents (22 percent) said they would need to purchase coolers for fruit and vegetable storage. Twenty percent would need to change their food inventory and 17 percent would need to change the types of products sold. Ten percent indicated that they would need to increase the number of food service staff. Forty-two percent of the responding food service directors said that they already met this fruit and vegetable standard.

Table D-4: Changes of Food Service Operations—Fruits and Vegetables
(N=173 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

Food Service Changes	Responding Districts	Percent
Already meet standard	72	42
Purchase coolers for fruit and vegetable storage	38	22
Change food inventory	35	20
Change types of products sold	29	17
Increase food service staff	17	10
Find new vendors	15	9
Improve kitchen facilities	14	8
Other	14	8
Increase food service budget	12	7
Don't sell a la carte foods in high school	10	6
Obtain technical assistance	4	2
Don't know	5	3

District Wide Standards

Table D-5 shows that twenty-five school districts (14 percent) responded that they had developed and implemented their own district-wide standards for a la carte foods sold on high school campuses.

Table D-5: District Wide Standards for A La Carte Foods
(N=173 districts)

District Wide Standards	Responding Districts	Percent
No	124	72
Yes	25	14
Don't know	10	6
Missing	14	8

While the numbers are small, Table D-6 shows that five (20 percent) said that standards caused a la carte food sales to decline, while three (12 percent) said sales increased. Seven (28 percent) respondents reported a decline in overall food service profits, while three (12 percent) reported an increase in profit. Two respondents (8 percent) reported increased NSLP sales as a result of a la carte standards while none of the respondents reported a decrease in NSLP participation. Five respondents (20 percent) said that standards resulted in students eating healthier foods, and three (12 percent) reported that a la carte standards had no impact. Respondents described other impacts of a la carte standards including increased milk consumption and loss of revenue.

Table D-6: Impact on District Implemented Standards
(N=25 districts. Respondents selected all that apply.)

District Implemented Standards	Responding Districts	Percent
Decreased profit	7	28
Decreased a la carte sales	5	20
Students eating healthier foods	5	20
Other impact	5	20
Increased a la carte sales	3	12
Increased profit	3	12
No impact	3	12
Don't know impact	3	12
Increased NSLP	2	8
Decreased NSLP	0	0

Challenges to Implementation of Standards

A series of survey questions explored the personal opinions of food service directors related to the challenges of implementing the proposed standards. Challenges explored by this survey included participation in the NSLP, cooperation of food vendors, and competition between food-related fundraisers and school meal programs for student business.

Impact on NSLP Participation

Food service directors were asked their opinion of what impact the proposed a la carte standards would have on NSLP participation. As found in the 2000 survey, directors noted that student

participation in the NSLP at the high school level is low and they feared any change that may negatively impact NSLP participation rates. Twenty-nine percent believed that a la carte standards would not have an impact on NSLP participation, while 28 percent were unsure what the impact would be, 23 percent thought it would decrease participation, and only 6 percent thought it would increase participation (Table D-7).

Table D-7: Impact on National School Lunch Program

(N=173 districts)

Impact on NSLP	Responding Districts	Percent
No impact	51	29
Don't know	48	28
Decrease Participation	40	23
Other	15	9
Increase Participation	11	6
Missing	8	5

Food Vendors

School food service departments depend on the foods available from food vendors. The survey asked several questions about food vendors to establish the degree to which vendors sell healthy foods. The majority (65 percent) of food service directors felt that food vendors would be very cooperative or cooperative in selling foods that meet the a la carte standards. However, one-quarter (25 percent) felt that the food vendors would be somewhat or very uncooperative (Table D-8).

Table D-8: Cooperativeness of Food Vendors in Regard to Healthy Foods

(N=173 districts)

Food Vendor Cooperative	Responding Districts	Percent
Cooperative	76	44
Very cooperative	36	21
Somewhat cooperative	32	19
Very uncooperative	11	6
Missing	18	10

Food Service Directors' Concerns and Support Regarding Nutrient Standards

Food service directors were asked open-ended questions about their personal feelings about nutrient standards and the type of help they would need to overcome concerns. In general, respondents feared that nutrient standards would cause lower student acceptance of a la carte foods, of the cafeteria, and of food service. Directors also feared that students would seek food and beverages from outside of the school environment, resulting in decreased food service revenue.

Food service directors expressed the need for significant assistance in order to implement a la carte nutrient standards. Examples included:

- Financial compensation for revenue loss.
- Marketing strategies that promote healthier foods.
- Closed campuses at lunch so that students can not leave campus to buy food and beverages.

- Zoning to stop street vendors from selling foods so close to campus.
- Technical assistance on how to implement nutrient standards.
- Cooperation from other school groups selling a la carte items.

Food service directors also expressed favorable opinions about a la carte standards. Examples included:

- A la carte standards would help students to choose more sensible foods and to develop better eating habits.
- If a la carte standards apply to the entire campus and are enforced, students would see healthy eating modeled and would receive nutrition education as they make food choices.
- A la carte standards would be the “death of competitive vending machines, which is a good thing for the school lunch service.”

E. LOW-INCOME DISTRICTS

Fifty-four of the responding districts can be classified as low-income because at least 50 percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced price meals. An analysis comparing the low-income districts to districts with less than 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price meals revealed that survey responses from low-income districts are very similar to other districts' responses. The sections below highlight some of the similarities and the few notable differences.

A La Carte Foods

Eleven percent of low-income districts (six districts) reported implementing standards for a la carte foods. This is slightly lower than the 16 percent (19 districts) of moderate- to high-income districts that have instituted a la carte food standards. Similar to other districts, the most popular brands found on campuses in low-income districts are Pepsi (35 percent, 19 low-income districts), Coke (30 percent, 16 low-income districts), Domino's Pizza (20 percent, 11 low-income districts), and Pizza Hut (18 percent, 10 low-income districts). A much smaller percentage of low-income districts reported selling district-branded a la carte items: nine percent of low-income districts (five districts) versus 29 percent (35 districts) of moderate- to high-income districts. The practice of modifying a la carte foods to improve nutrient content is popular in all districts; 42 percent (23) of low-income districts reported modifying a la carte foods and 47 percent (56) of moderate to high-income districts modify a la carte foods.

Food Service Budget

A higher percentage of low-income districts reported annual food service department budgets over \$10 million—52 percent (28 low-income districts) compared to 39 percent (46 moderate or high-income districts). However, a smaller portion of the food service operating budget in low-income districts is derived from a la carte sales. Table E-1 shows that a la carte sales make up less than a third of the food service budget in 42 percent (23) of the responding low-income districts versus 24 percent (28) in the moderate- to high-income districts. Twenty-two percent of low-income districts (12) said that a la carte sales accounted for 30 percent or more of the food service budget, while 58 percent of moderate or high income districts reported over 30 percent of the food service budget coming from a la carte sales.

Table E-1: Food Service Operating Budget From A la Carte Food Sales: Low versus Moderate to High-Income Districts (N=173)

A La Carte Food Sales	Low-Income		Moderate- To High-Income	
	Districts N = 54	Percent	Districts N = 119	Percent
0-29% of budget (low)	23	43	28	24
30-59% of budget (medium)	11	20	47	40
60% and above (high)	1	2	22	18
Missing	19	35	22	18

F. CONCLUSIONS

School districts remain highly dependent on the sale of a la carte foods on high school campuses to support food service operation and other school related activities. This data suggests that low-income schools may be slightly less reliant on a la carte sales, but this is an area that needs further investigation.

One significant conclusion drawn from survey responses is that food service directors feel able to implement nutrient standards without significant capital improvements to food service facilities and/or increases to food service budgets.

Other key findings include:

- A significant portion of overall food service operating budgets is generated by a la carte food sales, including vending machines.
- The most common a la carte items are pizza, chips, cookies, and soda. With the exception of fruit, healthy items like, yogurt, bagels, and packaged salads are less common.
- Nutrient standards will require changes to the food inventory and types of items sold.
- Food service directors are divided in how they believe that nutrient standards for a la carte foods will impact on NSLP participation rates.
- School fundraisers compete with food service during meal times. Food service does not have control over the foods sold for fundraisers by school related organizations.

Recommendations for Student Health

- Eliminate the sale of foods and beverages that do not meet state nutrient standards. Instead, identify and promote healthy options that are popular with students.
- Provide financial and technical assistance resources to school districts to enable them to increase the provision and sale of healthy a la carte items.
- Fund research to identify successful sales strategies that minimize the financial impact of implementing a la carte food standards.
- Encourage increased participation in the NSLP at all high schools.
- Identify ways to work with vendors to increase the availability of reasonably priced foods that meet nutrient standards.
- Support student activities at appropriate funding levels to reduce the reliance on funds generated by sales of unhealthy foods.
- Give food services control over all food sales on campus to decrease competition.

- Eliminate exclusive contracts with food and beverage vendors in order to decrease unhealthy food/beverage advertising at school and to give school districts more control over the types of foods and beverages sold at school.

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This study was completed with funding from The California Endowment; the Preventive Health Services Block Grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and the California Nutrition Network for Healthy Active Families with funds from the national Food Stamp Program, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). USDA is an equal opportunity employer.