

Chicago Tribune

Changes in store for school vending machines

New regulations may shift focus to healthier foods for students

By Monica Eng, Tribune reporter

May 16, 2010

Crispy edamame, fresh bananas, fruity organic waters and pomegranate spiked nut clusters could replace sweets and sports drinks in school vending machines thanks to a crop of healthier products and government initiatives.

A provision in the Child Nutrition Act passed by the Senate would give the U.S. Department of Agriculture authority to regulate nutrition standards not just for the lunchroom, but for foods in the a la carte lines and vending machines as well. That bill is under consideration by the House.

Although the department won't detail what those standards might look like, it has promoted voluntary standards through its new HealthierUS Schools Challenge, and representatives say it will also take cues from "states that have already developed standards for" these kinds of foods.

These states — most notably New York and California — have spurred food manufacturers to develop healthier vending items just to remain competitive in the arena. This spring the Alliance for a Healthier Generation reported an 88 percent decrease in beverage calories shipped to schools from the first half of 2004-05 to 2009-10, mostly due to calorie reformulations and reduced container sizes.

This growing line of healthier products and stricter regulations could drastically change the school snacking landscape, and eventually the taste preferences of American school kids.

The vending machines of the near future were on display at the recent National Automatic Merchandising Association Show in Chicago, where fresh fruit, lightly flavored organic waters and natural sweets were creating a buzz.

Drink up!

In order to comply with standards set in New York and Chicago, public schools would have to replace commercial soft drinks with healthier alternatives.

CPS standard: Must be 100% juice or have fewer than 66 calories per 8 oz.; no artificial colors

NYPS standard: No more than 25 calories per 8 oz.; no artificial flavors, colors or sweeteners



● Pepsi (20 oz. bottle, 100 calories per 8 oz.)	● SoNu (12 oz. bottle, 25 calories per 8 oz.)
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NO	CPS	YES
NO	NYPS	YES

Many vending machine food-makers at the show said they would welcome a single set of federal regulations over the patchwork of state and district laws.

Illinois tightened its vending machine rules for elementary and middle schools in 2006, with a ban on fruit drinks that contained less than 50 percent real juice, fried vegetables, confections and snacks with more than 200 calories. In high schools, the state rules did not change, but some districts, such as Naperville, which banned drinks with high fructose corn syrup, have beefed up their own high school vending rules.

Chicago Public Schools recently switched from another sports drink brand to All Sport, sold in a 12-ounce, 90-calorie portion. The drink's second ingredient is high fructose corn syrup and it includes artificial flavors and red dye 40, but the 12-ounce portion conforms to CPS standards.

Those standards, however, don't match the guidelines of the USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge. The federal program encourages schools to voluntarily adopt healthier practices in exchange for certifications and federal money.

CPS officials have announced their intentions to gain "gold" status under the program next year, but the sports drinks would disqualify any school that sells them.

The district also fails to match up with the HealthierUS Schools vending guidelines by allowing snacks that derive 40 percent of their weight from sugar, according to CPS documents. The USDA program limits sugar to 35 percent.

"The snack policy and beverage vending guidelines are under review, so we are considering other beverage alternatives," CPS spokeswoman Monique Bond said.

In New York City, education officials have laid down some of the toughest vending standards in the country. In addition to restrictions on sugar and fat, officials have set salt limits and fiber minimums, while restricting high school beverages to 25 calories per serving and elementary school drinks to 10 calories.

The man in charge of filling the New York snack machines is John Murn. His company, The Answer Group, won the vending machine contract for the huge district last year, which made him a very popular guy at the Automatic Merchandising Association Show here.

He walked the floor pointing out companies that will be supplying at least 500 New York vending machines with sliced apples, fresh bananas, baby carrots, nut clusters, naturally flavored licorice and fruity waters. He also showed off a machine that displays nutrition information on a LCD screen when a student is choosing a snack.

Murn said he still contends with complaints that the machines should be banned from schools or that they should only operate for limited hours. But he believes that if the machines sell healthy foods, they can raise much-needed money for schools while establishing good eating habits.

"We believe that healthy snacks should be available to the kids all day so that they can pick up a healthy snack at any time. Otherwise they will just go to another venue," Murn said.


Last week The Answer Group rolled out a test batch of 10 refrigerated fruit machines in middle schools and high schools in the Bronx, Queens and Manhattan.

"I wasn't sure the kids were going to eat the fruit but on the first day we sold out of watermelon and mango slices," he said.

Del Monte, also at the show, officially introduced its line of fresh fruit machines late last year and tested them in four Chicago locations, said Marketing Director Vidya Samsundar.

"The response has been exciting, with college students preferring the bananas and vegetables and schoolchildren going for the fruits," she said.

In a challenge to drink innovators, the New York City Department of Education dropped Snapple last year and put out a call for what seemed like an impossible beverage. It demanded a drink with no more than 25 calories per 8 ounces, no caffeine, no artificial sweeteners and no carbonation. Oh, and it also had to appeal to high school kids.



At least two manufacturers — SoNu and Inko's— came up with drinks that fit the bill, both of which were on display at the recent show and are on sale in New York public schools.

Organic SoNu fruit waters haven't sold as well as Snapple and conventional drinks did, but representative Kara Schnabel believes in time more schoolchildren will come around.

"I think it's fantastic because it's training them at an early age," said Schnabel, who reports that she's gotten orders from Chicago schools. "And they will have no choices but healthy choices. You can't control what they eat at home but you can at school. And they like it."

It's also training manufacturers to get used to a new reality.

"Between what's happening in New York and D.C. (with federal anti- obesity efforts) we tell all the manufacturers that this is the new norm," said Murn. "And so either they change the product or we don't sell them."

Beyond schools, some institutions serving large groups of children are switching to healthier vending machines, seeking to spark a transition.

Evanston's McGaw YMCA contracted with Yo-Naturals for products like Pirate's Booty, organic sandwich cookies, Clif Bars, fruit juices, kettle corn, natural root beer and organic milk. Prices at that machine are 30 to 60 percent higher than regular machines down the hall at the Y.

"We put in the new machine about nine months ago because we want to offer members healthier options," said Juliet Garrard, spokeswoman for the YMCA. "Right now we are in a transitional stage, but members, particularly parents with kids, are very interested."