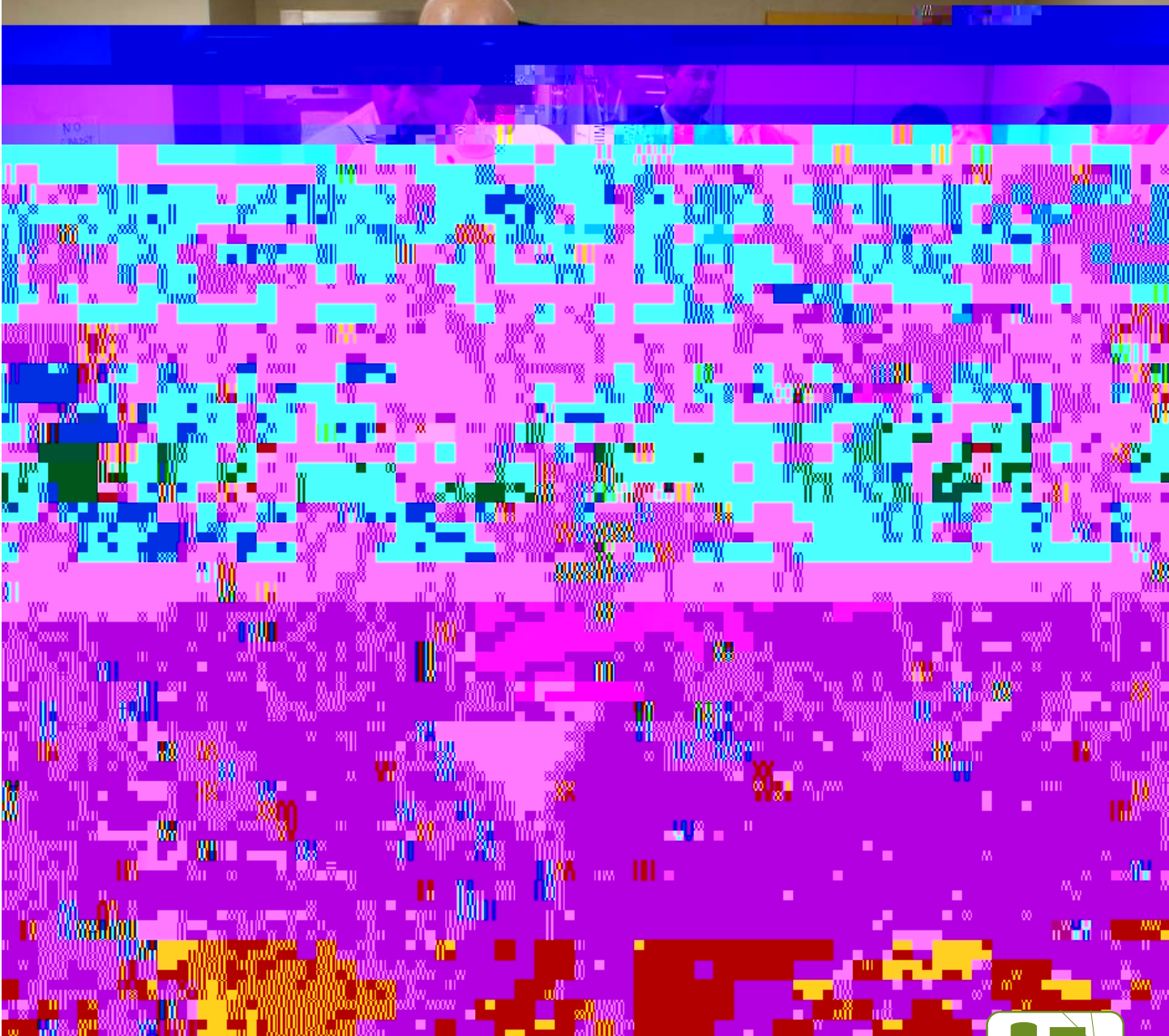


# The Transformation of the School Food Environment in Los Angeles:

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# 1. Introduction

During the past decade, there has been increasing attention regarding the importance – and the problems – associated with the food available at schools. Rising levels of overweight-, obesity-, and diet-related illnesses have drawn attention to the need for interventions where children live, learn, and play. New policies at the school district, state, and federal level have been established to address these challenges in school settings, from cafeterias to classrooms. These include: bans and regulations to restrict beverages high in sugar and low nutrient snack food available in vending machines and through a la carte sales and fundraising events; improving the nutritional quality of meals served in school cafeterias; increasing access and participation in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, and the introduction of healthier options and practices, such as salad bars, farm to school, and school garden programs.

School food has been particularly a major focus of policymakers, school officials, parents, teachers, students, and community members related to the school food environment in the

Latino children. Many of the schools that participated in the study asked the researchers what solutions they could offer to help reduce obesity and the diet related diseases their students were facing. In collaboration with the Center for Food & Justice (a division of the

developed.

In April of 2001, CFJ organized a meeting of concerned parents, teachers, students, and staff of allied organizations to discuss the possible formation of a group to advocate for strong food and nutrition policies in LAUSD.

The group decided to form a new entity, the Healthy School Food Committee (later renamed the Healthy School Food Coalition or HSFC) to advocate for improved policies and to also bring about changes on the ground in the school food environment at individual school sites. The group emphasized the importance of parent and student involvement in the process of identifying issues and policy solutions and, as a first step, circulated a petition and gathered over 500 signatures in support of this community participation approach. At the same time, California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), among other groups, continued to try to influence LAUSD staff and top management to consider and ultimately pursue a nutrition-based approach to school meals and expand participation in its school lunch and breakfast programs.

Partly as a consequence of these initial efforts, in 2002 the Child Nutrition Advisory Committee (CNAC) was formed that included LAUSD school food officials, students, parents, and community advocates from the Healthy School Food Coalition and California Food Policy Advocates, to discuss and formulate recommendations regarding school food 582.6857 Tm [(f)13(or)-4

### 3. The Healthy Beverage Resolution

As the school food organizing and policy advocacy continued to expand, a key focal point emerged -- the ubiquitous presence of sugary beverages, including sodas, that were readily available to students in vending machines and in student stores. The healthy school food advocates strongly objected to these arrangements on multiple grounds, including their health impacts and the social justice implications, where often low income students ended up paying for food and drinks within the schools. These competitive foods, as they were known (competitive with the school cafeteria food) had become available in school districts throughout the country during the 1980s and 1990s. This was due in part to pouring rights contracts with companies like Pepsi and Coca Cola, that provided a trade-off defined by the soda companies and the school business managers as “win-win” – school districts got revenue from the sales and the soda companies got a foothold and a kept audience within the school in their quest for lifelong brand loyalty. The ones who lost were the students who paid not only with money, but with their health, for unhealthy sodas and junk food. School food service operations also often suffered since cafeteria sales tended to decline, the greater the sales of the sodas and the junk food.

Given their opposition to this quid pro quo arrangement, the school food advocates began to engage in discussions with LAUSD school board members Marlene Canter and Genethia Hayes about addressing the problem of the competitive foods and drinks, with a particular focus on sodas sold in vending machines. At a board committee hearing in August 2002, the soda issue was passionately addressed through testimony from pediatric endocrinologist Dr. Francine Kaufman, a leading diabetes treatment specialist, about the health impact on children of continued beverage consumption high in sugars, and from a group of Venice High School students who had successfully eliminated sodas from their campus as part of a state pilot project. Soon after, Board Member Canter introduced a district resolution to impose restrictions on beverages sold in LAUSD schools, with Board Member Hayes signing on to the motion as a co-author. This resolution, known as the “The Healthy Beverage Resolution,” came to be popularized as the LAUSD “soda ban.”

As the campaign intensified, Los Angeles representatives from California Project LEAN and

represented a major change in the school food environment. As a result, a showdown with the soda companies and their supporters over this major new policy seemed inevitable.

As the vote neared, the HSFC organizers effectively mobilized students, parents, and teachers to generate support at the grassroots level. Some students were concerned that many of their peers would automatically oppose a policy that limited their access to sodas on school grounds. But through the organizing and heavy media coverage, both before, during, and

after the vote on the soda ban, it became clear that a strong constituency supported the action.

Following a series of meetings with these board members, a letter writing, e-mail, and phone campaign was launched. Parents, teachers, students, and other community members were mobilized and a number of anti-hunger, community food security, environmental, and community-based organizations were solicited to sign on to the campaigns were







to the paucity of fresh vegetables in the cafeteria. Student testimony helped sway board members to adopt the cafeteria provisions (salad bars, fruit & vegetable promotion, fast food restrictions, the convening of a cafeteria lunch review panel) as part of the Obesity Prevention Motion, which was enacted by the Board in October 2003. Media coverage during this campaign was less pronounced, but it was clear that the breakthrough soda ban policy had been significantly extended.

Following the adoption of “The Obesity Prevention Motion,” a Lunch Review Panel was convened and facilitated by the Los Angeles County Nutrition Program and Los Angeles Project LEAN. School food and nutrition expert representatives came together with the LAUSD Food Services Director to address current problem areas and the lack of healthy food options in the lunch program as well as strategies for improvements. The Lunch Review Panel process began the discussions to introduce policy that would be designed to improve the school meal program.

During 2004, a number of changes in the key health organizations resulted in a different alignment of school nutrition collaborative partners. Some staff left to take other positions, others focused on different school districts, and some chose different sub-issues (soymilk, organics, vegan), but the students and parents of HSFC as well as their primary partner, the California Food Policy Advocates, kept focusing on the problems associated with choices, the barriers to participating in the program, the logistics and overall environment in school cafeterias.

Along with CFPA, HSFC reviewed cafeteria practices around the state, analyzed data on low participation, and studied the latest reports on the role of school meals in obesity prevention. During this period, Board Member Canter continued to receive complaints that her two landmark policies had not been sufficiently implemented and that the cafeteria meals needed improvement, ensuring her staff commitment to working with CFPA and HSFC on school lunch policies.

In May 2005, HSFC student leaders conducted a comprehensive survey developed by students which focused on their perceptions of the cafeterias at over 20 schools. The results were stunning: a majority of students had consumed burned, frozen, and poorly prepared foods within the prior month; a majority of the students said that long lines deterred them from participating; and a majority of students had not seen the promised vegetables and salads. Students also noted lack of sufficient time to eat during the lunch period and saw meal tickets as a barrier to accessing food in the school cafeteria.

During the summer and fall of 2005, HSFC and CFPA, as well as some new partners such as the community advocacy group POWER, carefully crafted another motion to address shortcomings in the district’s cafeteria program. Opposition from the food services leadership





and to identify strategies for implementation. HSFC continually pressed the District on the importance of student, teacher, and parent engagement in the process of changing the overall school food environment as well as implementation of the three resolutions.

The changes in the Cafeteria Improvement Motion signaled to the district's leadership that the Board expected a different approach to cafeteria meals and communications, resulting in the Business Manager adopting an open, collaborative process to select the district's new food services director and senior staff, including new nutritionist-related positions. As a result, HSFC staff and CFPA were able to participate as part of the hiring panel.

During the next three years, the focus on implementation became the basis for a new and more expansive approach to grassroots organizing facilitating the process of change. The school food organizers focused on three areas: 1) at the District level, through venues such as the Cafeteria Improvement Committee as well as by facilitating board involvement; 2) at individual school sites, where new initiatives could be developed and where lack of implementation could also be monitored and changed; and 3) by increasing the capacity and leadership skills of students and parents, by focusing on community food environments as well as schools, and by helping establish new grassroots linkages with other community-based organizations that were becoming engaged in school food and health issues. These efforts were assisted through support provided by several foundations focused on healthy school food issues (notably, the Arthur & Rosalinde Gilbert Foundation, the California Endowment, and Kaiser Permanente) as well as through the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences which also sought to link researchers with community-based organizations.

The support provided by the Gilbert, Kaiser, and California Endowment foundations was especially significant in that it created a new type of collaborative structure that was seen as essential in pursuing implementation of the breakthrough policies and, ultimately, a transformation of how LAUSD went about providing food for its students. The new collaborative arrangement included three partners: 1) HSFC, which focused on building capacity among students and parents, identifying supportive teachers, and engaged directly with district staff to facilitate school environment changes; 2) the CFPA, through its work on new federally-mandated School Wellness policies as well as its work with HSFC through the new LAUSD committee structures to point the way for effective policy implementation; and 3) a new liaison position, between the board and the district staff, specifically the Food Services Division, funded through the Gilbert/Kaiser/California Endowment grant, that was first housed in Board member Marlene Canter's office and was led by a healthy school food advocate.

much had been accomplished at the District level in implementing the three resolutions and, more broadly, in changing the District approaches to the school food issue. This included the work of the various District committees in unencing and improving operations; increasing meal presentation and variety; creating greater student interest in school food to provide feedback and help make changes; helping facilitate a board-district sta linkage by creating the new liaison position to provide board input in implementation and work directly with the community advocates; identifying methods and funds to improve cafeteria layout and design; and by changing the structure and sta ng of the Food Services Division that had helped create a new openness to collaboration with students and parents in bringing about changes identi ed through the organizing and monitoring that had taken place.

The organizers operated at every level of District work and ensured that newly empowered students and parents were also able to provide information about their experiences with school food and the process of implementation at their school sites. Feedback was provided about issues like menus, organization of the lunchroom, nutrition information, and student engagement. This would insure that the information on the ground provided by school communities became part of the deliberations and ultimately the decision-making process among the various District committees and sta . Key issues included lunch schedules and length of the lunch hour, number and rotation of menu choices, upgrades in eating areas, including better signage, marketing new menu items and students' ability to view what entrees were o ered before making their choice of meals. Logistical issues such as shorter lines and a computerized system to substitute for meal tickets that had contributed to the stigma associating school lunch as "county food" were also identi ed and positions taken on changes that were needed.

Both the quality of the school meals and the District-wide level of participation in the school lunch program improved signi cantly. The hiring of a new chef and a nutrition coordinator and the constant work that took place to engage students and parents helped create feedback related to healthier menu choices, including the elimination of some fast food items

at the school sites, LAUSD school lunch numbers increased in 2007 and again in 2008 compared to previous years that began to overcome students' historical dislike of cafeteria food that had previously reduced those numbers to below a 50% participation rate. Finally, upon the retirement of school board member and healthy school food champion Marlene Canter, the board/staff liaison position was transitioned into the District for increased capacity to monitor and help facilitate the implementation of the board's policies.

While maintaining a focus on District-wide changes, the HSFC organizers recognized the critical importance of school-based organizing and specific opportunities for identifying and implementing changes at the school site. Through initial contacts at about a half-dozen schools and growing interest of students, teachers, and parents due to the District-wide organizing campaigns such as for the Cafeteria Improvement Motion, HSFC established a presence at 20 high, middle, and elementary schools, with additional contacts at a number of other school sites as well. Students and parents at several of the schools took on increased leadership roles and various strategies were employed to reach out to the broader student and parent populations at the individual schools. These included surveys identifying progress (or lack of) in implementing the school board resolutions; issues regarding the logistics associated with the breakfast and lunch meals, the quality and type of food items offered; and ways to improve the performance (and generate greater participation in school lunch) of the food service operation. The latter strategy (improving performance) was pursued through the use of "Comment Cards" that were designed in collaboration with the District's new Nutrition Coordinator. Hundreds of such cards were filled out at pilot school sites, commenting on various aspects of the school food environment such as ambiance, meal presentation, and other logistical and food quality issues and became one of the organizing instruments for feedback and pressure for change at both the school and District level. The volume, and range of the feedback from the Comment Cards demonstrated not only where and how the school

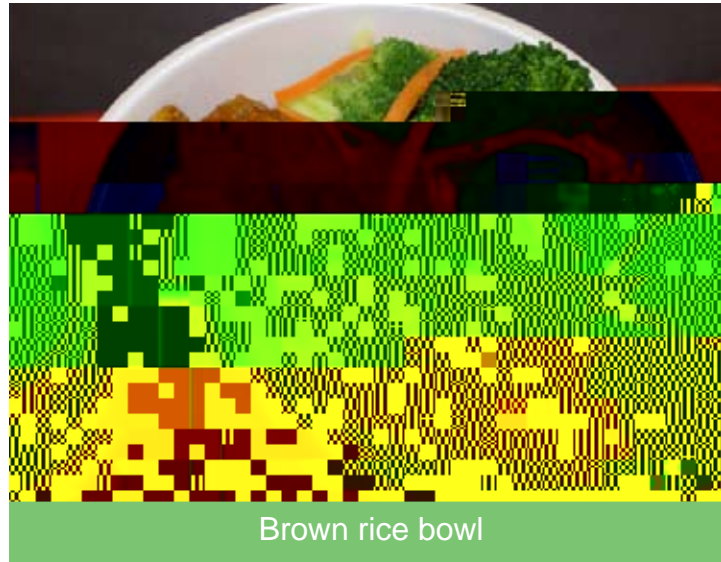
after school or during lunch time to eventually replace those items with cut fruit and other similar options and/or eliminate the sale activities altogether.

be able to make change through continuing pressure and increased awareness. Organizing around these issues has represented a form of leadership training while also utilizing the tools associated with outreach, research, and education to get more students and parents engaged in the process of change. While this work occurs at the school site or through District venues such as the District-initiated Teen Nutrition Team (TNT), HSFC organizers have also focused on trainings and leadership development through regional HSFC gatherings, activities, and school site campaigns in reaching out to community members as well. HSFC has partnered with a wide range of community organization to increase grassroots capacity about both school food and community food issues and to help train their staff, clients and partners. This has also included youth-based community work, such as the South East Asian Community Alliance (SEACA). Along those lines, HSFC, working through the Center for Food & Community Enterprise (CFCE), has worked with other community based partners, Espeangza om



resolution in 2008. At the same time, HSFC and CFPA are aware that organizing and policy development and implementation is slow and painstaking, even as new campaigns like the Soda Ban can suddenly erupt and point to the possibility of significant change.

Organizing around school food issues at LAUSD has been an enormous challenge. The LAUSD bureaucracy has historically been opaque, cumbersome, and slow or resistant to change. The changes that have occurred around school food issues are even more noteworthy, given that the school staff and leadership have become more responsive and a far more fruitful dialogue and at least partial implementation of such a far-reaching policy mandate is possible. Perhaps most dramatically, these changes are occurring while the school district, the state of California, and the nation as a whole are facing dramatic budget and financial crises that threaten to undermine the very nature of public school education, including what takes place before, during, and after the school lunch period.



The organizing and policy development strategy for HSFC and CFPA and its multiple partners remains a continuous process, that not only includes ensuring that the commitment to healthy school food remain a priority in LAUSD but that such a commitment extends to such areas as the quality of after-school food and snack programs, parent and school fundraisers, the continuing effort to introduce farm to school as a cafeteria option, and the need to integrate school food issues with other “healthy school” needs such as increased and effective physical education programs. Most importantly, HSFC and CFPA organizing is designed to continue to develop and expand a leadership base of students and parents who will have the knowledge and desire to act to change the conditions that so significantly impact their lives. This need for grassroots organizing, policy development, and school and community based leadership ultimately becomes the need for a more open and engaged school system, a more vibrant and vital community, and a more democratic and just society.