

Sale of Junk Food at School Banned

L.A. Unified campuses will be required to offer more healthful treats for students.

By Cara Mia DiMassa, Times Staff Writer

The Los Angeles Unified School District decided Tuesday to secede from Candyland.

Its 713 campuses next year will be kicking out Twix, Snickers and M&Ms in favor of more healthful treats, such as nuts, baked chips, fruit snacks and pretzels.

In hopes of slimming down its many chubby students, the Los Angeles Board of Education voted unanimously to ban fried chips, candy and other junk foods from school vending machines and student stores and to put strict limits on the amount of fat, sugar and sodium in any snacks sold during the school day.

Most of the changes are to go into effect July 1, 2004, joining a previously approved ban on soft drinks that starts in January.

"We have a chance to make a difference in the health of our kids," said board member Marlene Canter, who was the driving force behind the proposal. "The provisions of this motion move us in that direction in a big-time way.

"As the second biggest school district in the nation, our actions today will resonate," she said.

The junk-food ban does not affect regular cafeteria menus, which are governed by separate federal nutritional guidelines. But the plan urges the district to increase the variety and accessibility of fresh fruits and vegetables. It also directs administrators to figure out how to end contracts with brand-name fast-food vendors that sell pizza and burgers on some campuses.

The school board also voted unanimously Tuesday night to adopt a new one-year pilot policy that relaxes a former ban on students' use of cell phones, pagers and other electronic devices on Los Angeles Unified campuses. The new trial rules permit students to use them during lunch and nutrition breaks but also gives campus administrators the power to revoke those privileges if the phones prove disruptive.

The cell phone change was adopted with little discussion, unlike the nutrition measure. Some teachers and coaches expressed concerns that the junk-food ban would prevent candy sales that fund many extracurricular activities. But Canter and other advocates said that the sale of more healthful foods could prove as lucrative, and a lot less fattening.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 15% of American children between the ages of 6 and 19 are considered obese, up from 6% two decades ago. In addition, doctors are seeing more children with ailments that were once considered "adult" problems often linked to obesity: high blood pressure, clogged arteries and type-2 diabetes. Those risks, the CDC reported, are especially high for Latino children, who make up the majority of Los Angeles district students.

None of that seemed to matter to Stephanie Vasquez, a senior at Franklin High School who expressed relief that the ban would go into effect after she graduated.

"I think that's very stupid," she said in an interview from home. "You go to school all lazy and tired and you need something to wake you up. You do need some sugar. It's like taking the teachers' coffee away. If you want us to get good grades, we need to be psyched up for class We want a soda here or there, or a bag of chips."

In 2001, Gov. Gray Davis signed legislation that would give California elementary schools 10 cents per meal if they limited the sale of junk food and soda. But so far, the law's \$60 million price tag has not been funded.

Earlier this month, Davis signed another bill that prohibits all public elementary, middle and junior high schools in the state from selling sodas on campus, starting next July.

Texas has banned junk food in its elementary and middle schools; New York City has banned junk food from all school vending machines. Other states and districts are considering similar limitations.

Gail Woodward-Lopez, associate director of the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley, said that, in part because of its diverse population, Los Angeles has been a "wonderful role model" in seeking better diets for its students. Asked about the junk-food ban, Woodward-Lopez said, "If Los Angeles can do it, any school district can do it.

"It's not that the schools are better or worse than any other institution, but kids spend a large portion of their day at school," she said. "The school should be a model for providing healthy foods, making those foods tasty and affordable. I think it's a no-brainer."

Tuesday's motion was approved by six of the seven board members. Mike Lansing had left the meeting during the time of the vote without a public explanation; later, according to an aide, he declined to comment.

The plan also requires that each school meal include at least one vegetarian option. It directs Los Angeles schools Supt. Roy Romer to provide salad bars in all district high schools within two years and all elementary schools within six years.

In addition, the resolution says the district should work toward eliminating, within three years, all contracts with brand-name fast-food companies.

Arely Herrera, whose 9-year-old son attends Hoover Elementary, said she had been surprised when he brought home a menu of the foods served at the school cafeteria. Lunches for a week in September were a burrito, hamburger, corn dog, nachos supreme and pepperoni pizza from Pizza Loca.

"I wait once a month to give him pepperoni pizza," Herrera said. "But he gets that every Friday at school! They give him food he doesn't like, and he comes home from school starving. How are kids able to get good grades if they don't have healthy foods?"

Herrera has been an active participant in the Healthy Schools Coalition, a group of teachers, parents, students and activists who pushed for changes in the foods served at school.

Rosa Villar, 15, a 10th-grader at Downtown Magnet High School, is also a member of that coalition. Since elementary school, Rosa, who plays junior varsity basketball, has waited until she gets home to eat a nutritious lunch. By just looking at the cafeteria food, "you can tell it's unhealthy," she said. "I think that should change."

Supporters of Canter's plan include state Supt. of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell and Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, as well as such community groups as the Center for Food and Justice, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, the Los Angeles Food Justice Network, Public Citizen and the Verde Coalition.

Its detractors were mostly people who worried about how to compensate for the money raised by candy sales for field trips, bands, school dances and some athletic programs.

Birmingham High School athletic director Rick Prizant said that the limitations could mean the loss of "tens of thousands of dollars" that the school would be unable to make up.

But district officials pointed to two high schools — Venice and Monroe — where restrictions on the kinds of foods sold in vending machines and student stores have been in effect for at least six months. Those schools saw a dip initially, but now show only a negligible difference between money raised from healthful snacks and that from junk foods, they said.

Lisa Jones, a Monroe High School administrator who runs the healthful food program there, said students had been consulted when the student store was restocked with Rice Krispies Treats, spicy nuts and sunflower seeds. "We have brought them along every step of the way," she said. "We buy stuff in the store based on what they say to us."

The school board's other action Tuesday, modifying its policy on cell phone use, will allow students to keep the phones in lockers, purses or pockets during the year's trial run. But students will be prohibited from using them on campus during school hours, except lunchtime and nutrition breaks.

The district had to review its former, widely ignored ban on the devices after the state last year rescinded a 15-year-old prohibition against "electronic signaling devices" at California schools and allowed districts to set their own rules. The state change was a response to parents who wanted to be able to reach their children during emergencies.

Romer said he had allowed the use of cell phones during lunch and nutrition breaks after principals told him that they couldn't enforce a ban during those periods.