

San Francisco Chronicle

Tuesday, October 15, 2002

Teachers sizzle over fast food fund-raiser Some say it promotes unhealthy choices

[Meredith May, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

Teachers at a South San Francisco school are being asked to pour milk shakes, salt fries and flip burgers at McDonald's to raise money for their school -- and some of them are burned up about it.

McDonald's calls it "McTeacher's Night," a fund-raiser set up by the fast-food chain that gives 20 percent of the profits for teachers who volunteer three hours behind the counter. While they can always use extra cash for the classroom, some Martin Elementary School teachers believe it's degrading for them and unhealthy for the kids, who are encouraged to bring their families to dine at the Golden Arches.

"We will be endorsing a product that contributes to the epidemic of childhood obesity and heart disease, even though the state dictates that we teach students to avoid junk food," said first-grade teacher Rebecca Coolidge.

In the past two years, the fast-food giant has expanded its McTeachers Night event to 2,500 schools in 14 western states. Last year McDonald's donated \$500,000 through the program, and schools earned about \$800 each.

Martin Elementary Principal Dee Anne Paron, who will work along with the teachers Wednesday evening, said the deal worked out with her school is that each teacher will earn \$100 in classroom funds for the evening. Nearby Skyline Elementary in Daly City will send teachers as well. The South San Francisco Education Foundation, made up of parents and business leaders, is promising to match the \$500 total teachers will earn.

"It's a PR thing for McDonald's, and it will also encourage our community to eat there and support us," Paron said.

GRUMBLING IN LUNCHROOM

Four teachers volunteered to make Happy Meals, but other Martin teachers were grumbling in the lunchroom Monday about the encroachment of corporate marketing into schools and the ballooning epidemic of childhood obesity.

"It's demeaning," said one.

"This is exploiting teachers for a real, live McDonald's commercial," said Coolidge. With a recent surgeon general's report warning that childhood obesity has reached epidemic levels, many school districts, including Oakland and Los Angeles, are taking steps to wean students off fast food. In the last decade, the childhood obesity rate has doubled to include 13 percent of all kids.

The Oakland schools banned soda and candy in February, prompting the Los Angeles school district to follow suit in August.

"I think it's problematic for authority figures who students look up to to identify themselves with commercial enterprises, especially those that have been found to contribute to students' poor health," said Gail Woodward-Lopez, a childhood obesity expert and associate director of the Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley.

"There is an implicit endorsement there that is hard to avoid. If McDonald's wanted to be altruistic, it would just give the schools the money."

OLD ARGUMENTS

None of the arguments against McTeachers Night is new, said Patsy Barich, who works for DuDell & Associates, the Berkeley public relations firm that represents McDonald's.

McTeachers Night would not be a growing phenomenon, reaching 25 schools in the Bay Area this year, if it weren't a hit with the students, she said.

In Contra Costa County, Oakley Elementary School is planning a McTeachers Night on Thursday. In Oakland, Lazear Elementary held one a year ago.

"Kids like to go to McDonald's, that's the bottom line," Barich said. "So this is an easy way for schools to raise money." "Some schools hold carnivals and sell cotton candy. Is that any better?"

Corporate food giants have argued that sloth, not burgers, are contributing to the nation's bulging waistlines. Barich pointed out that McDonald's was the first major fast food restaurant to introduce salads and lower the fat content of its products in response to a national concern over trans-fatty acids.

One Martin teacher who is going to work at McDonald's said it's up to parents, not the food police, to monitor their children's diets.

'SOUNDS LIKE FUN'

"I think it sounds like fun," said first-grade teacher Pat Barrett-Dragan.

"I don't feel I'm being used. McDonald's is really good to our school: They have given our district money, and they put our students' artwork up in the restaurant. We should give them something back."

Wai-ling Eng, owner of the McDonald's restaurant holding the fund-raiser, donates money through several McDonald's charities, including the Keep Music Alive in Our Schools Program and an ethnic scholars program.

A third-grade teacher at Martin, who asked not to be identified, said the fund-raiser was a shallow cover for McDonald's efforts to build brand loyalty among little kids whose taste buds are still forming.

Teacher Coolidge worried that young students would not quite understand that the event is a one-shot deal, and they would keep returning to McDonald's to see if their teachers were working there.

Principal Paron said none of the concerned teachers had spoken to her, but she stressed that the fund-raiser was voluntary and if parents or teachers disagree with it, they are welcome to opt out.

"I think they have a very valid argument, but everyone is entitled to their own opinion," Paron said. "We teach about nutrition at this school, but honestly we can't tell people to stop going to fast food restaurants. It's their choice."