

Limiting School Food Choices Can Go Too Far

Should Junk Food Be Sold in Schools? , 2011

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Andrea King Collier is a writer and W.K. Kellogg Foundation/Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy Food and Society Policy fellow. Her work appears regularly in national magazines, including *Essence*, *More*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Real Health*, *National Medical Association Magazine*, and *AARP Magazine*.

New York's public schools are creating rules that will limit school bake sales, instead encouraging parent teacher associations and other fundraising groups to sell only fresh fruit and pre-packaged snack foods, including Pop-Tarts, Doritos, and baked potato chips. Homemade baked goods, however, will be off-limits except at very limited times. Parents concerned about this trend point out that homemade baked goods as a very occasional treat are far less nutritionally harmful than regular consumption of processed foods and sodas. In addition, teaching children to appreciate the effort and genuine ingredients that go into made-from-scratch baked goods could help give children a more discerning palate and respect for the process of cooking instead of enhancing their preference for readily available packaged foods.

Through a very sophisticated mathematical calculation, I have figured out that I have baked 1,532 cupcakes, cookies and little gooey pecan thingies for school bake sales. I hated every minute, but I did my tour of duty. And yes, I cheered when the last of my kids hit middle school and it became uncool for his mom to show up with cupcakes for any reason. But even I am horrified that bake sales are on the chopping block in the fight against childhood obesity. Bake sales? Really?

In New York, school officials are working to create a policy that would limit bake sales. In an effort to reduce childhood obesity, they are looking to ban baked good sales from schools, with the exception of one day per month or after 6 p.m. when very few people are around to buy or sell their wares. Instead, PTAs and other groups will be allowed to sell fresh fruits and vegetables along with some packaged items that are on the district's list of healthy snacks. Doritos are on the list. A chocolate chip cookie baked by Grandma, not so much.

I had a heated discussion about this issue with one of my young, zealous friends who is almost always a food buzz killer. "But don't you think that schools can raise just as much money if they sell carrots?" she asked. After a long pause, and much thought, I said "No, not ever."

Regulating Bake Sales

From a food policy standpoint, "Setting out guidelines for when and what is included in a bake sale may be a good way of modeling healthy food habits, which include variety and moderation," IATP [Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy] Food and Society Policy Fellow Alethia Carr says, "A bake sale held monthly, is different from a weekly sale for fund raising. A monthly offering of baked goods, that are wholesome, good food, including those with fruits and vegetables in the recipe, demonstrates a form of good eating for our children, while infrequent enough to demonstrate moderation." Carr says, "We have to remember that in schools, we're really showing our children how to live. Let's make sure we're doing it in a way that promotes good health."

The focus [of bake sales] could lie more on education about moderation and less on dictating ingredients.

But are we going too far? Cheryl Danley, an academic specialist at CS Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University believes that it is a good move for schools to begin to control what is on the school campus and to look at the various ways children access empty calories. "There is something to be said for moderation and honoring and recognizing people's food cultures." She thinks it is important to have discussions and forums about such moves. "The New York City health department unilaterally ordered the transfat ban, and also the Mayor's food Czar created the 'green cart' program of fresh fruit vendors without consulting communities."

But is the little bake sale where moms and kids bring in homemade goodies the main thing that's making kids fat? Nancy Baggett, baker, writer and author of several books including *The All American Cookie Book*, says "the sugary colas and 'fake fruit' drinks that folks guzzle by the gallon and 1,000-calorie burger and fries meals they routinely chomp down are the real problem because they are on menus every day." She adds that, "home-made baked sale goodies are a special treat eaten only once in a while. We always had school/church/community bake sales as I was growing up and almost nobody was obese, and even a slightly overweight child was an absolute rarity." Baggett says, "The difference now is the fat-packed junk food and super-sized drinks, NOT the cupcakes from the PTA sale."

Maybe traditional bake sales can be teachable real world moments for parents and kids, where the focus could lie more on education about moderation and less on dictating ingredients. "It is important to teach children that they can enjoy an occasional treat as long as they engage in an appropriate amount of physical activity that allows them to burn calories and maintain a healthy weight," says Maya Rockeymoore, Ph.D., president of Global Policy Solutions. "School officials should consider acceptable alternatives to traditional bake sales such as 'healthy bite' sales that offer more nutritious food items or 'bake and shake' sales in which students purchase healthier baked goods while burning off excess calories with physical activity such as dancing, hoola hoop, or other active play options."

Homemade vs. Store-bought

"I think this knee-jerk reaction to the 'obesity epidemic' is wrong, wrong, wrong" says Jill O'Connor, baker and author of several books including *Sticky, Chewy, Messy, Goopy: Desserts for the Serious Sweet Tooth*. "I am no longer allowed to bring home-baked goodies to the schools and no cupcakes on birthdays either. But I can bring in processed snacks—as long as they have the nutritional breakdown listed on the package—are still permitted in limited amounts." She also comments that "as a country, Americans tend to swing from one extreme to another in an effort to solve such big (no pun intended) problems—there are no shades of grey, no middle ground."

O'Connor is a scratch baker and a food purist in her own right. She makes a firm distinction between baking cupcakes from a boxed mix and icing them with canned frosting and a home-baked chocolate chip cookie made from scratch. "Kids should be exposed to real, honest-to-goodness baking, so they know what GOOD is, and will be more likely to pass up a Twinkie or packaged cookie if they have sampled something better." O'Connor also emphasizes the larger, satisfying benefits of actually producing homemade treats. "Real baking takes time, talent, patience and skill. If you want something sweet badly enough and you go to the trouble to shop for the ingredients, and skillfully assemble them into a delicious dessert you deserve to have a taste."

I feel a bit like Scarlett O'Hara, disheveled, flour on my face, holding a cupcake up to the heavens, declaring "By God as my witness, I will never do a bake sale again!" But it won't be because I am going to singlehandedly make kids fat with lemon blueberry muffins, or because I personally feel responsible for increasing fiber intake in little children, or because I want to tear down just one more cherished tradition. It will be because I have baked my 1,532 cupcakes, and I am too lazy to do any more.

Further Readings

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- Julie Lautenschlager *Food Fight! The Battle over the American Lunch in Schools and the Workplace*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006.
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- Janet Poppendieck *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010.
- Michele Simon *Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back*. New York: Nation Books, 2006.
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Source Citation:

"*Limiting School Food Choices Can Go Too Far*" by Andrea King Collier. *Should Junk Food Be Sold In Schools?* Norah Piehl, Ed. At Issue Series. Greenhaven Press, 2011.
 Andrea King Collier, "If You Give a Kid a Cupcake," *Civil Eats*, March 26, 2010.
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