

## AGENDA PRIORITIES

2. Improve school food environments and reduce school sales of low-nutrient, high-sugar, high-fat and calorie-dense foods through snack and vending machines or competitive food sales.

### A LA CARTE LINE, CLASSROOM SNACKS NEXT STOPS ON HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD JOURNEY

Martha Powelson has been working in food service at Alma Public Schools for 20 years. She's far from being an old-school food service director, however. In a break with the convention over the last 10 years, for example, she has allowed not one french fry to pass through her kitchens to a child's plate.

Alma Public Schools, serving nearly 1,500 lunches a day in the middle of Michigan's mitten, is on the leading edge of a healthy school food revolution, reducing sodium, fats, and sugars in the food it offers.

Currently Powelson and the district's administration are working with teachers, parents, athletic boosters, and school fundraising efforts to extend this work beyond the cafeteria to vending machines, athletic events, and even classroom rewards.

It's difficult telling parents that cupcakes aren't allowed for birthdays, Powelson said, even when the school compensates with other treats like extra recess. "But that's a lot of calories when you add up all the birthdays in the classroom." The adjustment process, mostly for the adults, is worth it, she said. "We want kids to have the best possible foundation so that they can grow and learn and excel; we know that kids who aren't healthy can't learn."

The Michigan Department of Education is working to help schools establish healthy food environments in the cafeteria and beyond. In 2010, the State Board of Education approved the Michigan Nutrition Standards, a set of recommendations that address all foods and beverages available in schools, including "competitive foods" (vending machines, a la carte, concessions etc.) and other non-cafeteria opportunities to improve the total school food environment.

Alma Public Schools is one of three districts that have piloted the Michigan Nutrition Standards campus-wide. Lessons the pilot schools learned and approaches they developed are included in a new Michigan Nutrition Standards Toolkit that other schools can use.

#### **Need**

Competitive foods at schools and school-related activities currently are not subject to federal nutrition guidelines, like school breakfasts and lunches. New federal standards for competitive foods are expected but in the meantime, parents have little power to prevent children from buying candy and soda at school; the vending machines are there but the parents are not.

Finally, competitive foods are tough to tackle because many schools rely on revenue from these sales to supplement tight budgets. Though experience has shown that healthy foods can be cost-neutral or even profitable<sup>1</sup>, it can be daunting for schools to risk making a switch.



*Photo courtesy of Alma Public Schools*

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Michigan schools have been progressively reducing the availability of less nutritious snacks and beverages in schools. Yet the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reports that 73 percent of Michigan middle and high schools still sell “less nutritious foods and beverages” outside of the USDA Child Nutrition Program’s school meals.<sup>2</sup>

### Opportunity

School boards and communities across Michigan are working to counter the influence that makers and advertisers of unhealthy foods have on youth in the school environment. They are becoming aware of CDC projections that the current generation of children may be the first not to outlive their parents, in part due to diet-related diseases.

Innovators like Martha Powelson and Alma Public Schools have much to share with schools across Michigan. Their work to improve the school food environment can have a positive effect on the food choices that parents and school staff make as well. “We want our staff to be healthy, too,” Powelson said. “It drives down our insurance costs, and ultimately the cost of medical care for the whole nation.”

### Action

The Michigan Nutrition Standards provide a solid foundation of recommendations for schools. An implementation toolkit that the Michigan Department of Education, Michigan Department of Community Health, and United Dairy Industry of Michigan have produced further supports schools with practical guidance and real-life experiences of schools that have piloted the new state standards.

To leverage these resources into greater change, local and state leaders can take the following steps:

- *Offer incentives for schools that demonstrate best practices and support collaboration and information sharing among schools.*
- *Support schools and the purchasing consortia they belong to in negotiations with food manufacturers for healthier products.*
- *Provide funding for equipment and tools school officials and community partners need to take action. For example, assistance with acquiring healthy vending machines can help schools and booster groups make the switch and provide a new option for competitive food revenue, too.*

### 1-2-3 Go!

Parents, community leaders, local health organizations and others can do their part by calling attention to the Michigan Nutrition Standards locally and offering assistance to schools and partners working to implement them. Transitioning school fundraisers from cookie dough sales to other products, for example, takes time tracking down different vendors, negotiating new contracts with companies, or venturing into novel alternatives, such as sales of locally produced farm and food products. Parents, teachers, and students could use help with planning and implementing new ideas like these.

<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) “Implementing Strong Nutrition Standards for Schools: Financial Implications.” Retrieved April 13, 2012 from [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/nutrition/pdf/financial\\_implications.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/nutrition/pdf/financial_implications.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) “Profiles 2010 - Chronic Disease Prevention: Michigan Schools” Retrieved April 13, 2012 from [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/profiles/pdf/facts/mi\\_chronic\\_profiles.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/profiles/pdf/facts/mi_chronic_profiles.pdf)