

The Transformation of the School Food Environment in Los Angeles:

The Link Between Grassroots Organizing and Policy Development and Implementation

A Research Brief, July 2009



Center for Food & Justice/Healthy School Food Coalition
Urban & Environmental Policy Institute
Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA
www.uepi.oxy.edu



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 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). With its 885 school sites, nearly 700,000 students, and 77,000 employees, LAUSD, the second largest school district in the country, has become a crucial player in whether and how opportunities to support development of healthier nutritional habits to reduce the rate of overweight among students can be established. With its low income and predominantly Latino population (72% Latino; 79.14% qualify for free and reduced lunch, yet 26% are also overweight and as much as 44% in some schools), LAUSD has had a poor track record regarding student interest in school cafeteria food, with only 34.5% of its students in 2006 eating the cafeteria lunch. With important and groundbreaking policy resolutions adopted in the last several years by the LAUSD board, new approaches to help transform the school food environment in LAUSD have become possible.

While various healthy school food policies have been championed by school board members and other policymakers, there is an important yet less visible reason why and how school food issues at LAUSD have been able to rise to the top of policy agendas: namely the role of grassroots organizing and policy research and development that has also involved the mobilization of students and parents to bring about, monitor, and implement change. This report seeks to document the role of grassroots organizing and policy development from below in contributing to efforts to transform the school food environment in LAUSD and increase the capacity of students, teachers, and parents to have a voice in identifying where such changes are needed and how they can be implemented and sustained.

2. 1998-2002 – An Organizing Agenda Emerges

In 1998-1999, a team of UCLA researchers from the UCLA School of Public Health conducted a study of diet and body mass index of children in low-income schools in LAUSD. The researchers found that as many as 35% of the students at fourteen schools were obese or overweight and that the problem was particularly acute for African-American and

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 Urban & Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College), three of the schools – one predominantly Latino, one predominantly African-American, and one predominantly Chinese, and all low income -- were selected to pilot an innovative program called “farm to school” that had first been introduced by CFJ in 1997 in California at the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District. The Santa Monica program to be utilized by LAUSD included a “farmers’ market salad bar” (now known as farm to school) consisting of fresh fruits and vegetables sourced from local and regional farmers who brought their produce to a local farmers’ market and then set aside the fruits and vegetables to be delivered to the central kitchen en route to the individual school cafeterias. The LAUSD farm to school pilots also included outreach and educational programs designed to increase student and parent engagement and greater food literacy.

The three pilot programs were a major success, with large numbers (more than half of the students at two of the schools) selecting a farmers’ market salad bar option for their lunch meal which also increased participation in school lunch overall. A second program, involving pilots in 2000-2001 offering fresh fruits and healthy snacks and related educational



Farmers’ market salad bar pilot program

activities at nine LAUSD after school programs, also demonstrated strong success, both for students’ increased interest in trying new fruits and vegetables as well as parent and teacher interest in the program; findings based on surveys of student and teacher participants. However, LAUSD officials decided to discontinue the three farm to school pilots after their first year, although some limited improvements were made in the lunch menu as a result of the pilots. This included the development of some conventionally sourced salad bars and school garden sites, and the establishment of the LAUSD Nutrition Network program to facilitate those developments at schools where more than 50% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. CFJ and its allied organizations, such as the California Food Policy Advocates and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (both statewide public policy organizations), recognized that in order to break through the bureaucratic hurdles associated with a large school district in order more substantially influence school food policies and decisions, strategies for grassroots organizing, mobilization, and policy change needed to be

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



HSFC planning retreat

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 and nutrition issues.



Later that year, the HSFC began to organize against the incorporation of foods from 3 major fast food companies into the National School Lunch Program in LAUSD. Through LAUSD's "Triple Header Program," students in more than 40 pilot schools would be able to purchase Domino's, Pizza Hut, or La Pizza Loca as part of the National School Lunch Program. Through organizing and related research and education, HSFC highlighted the Triple Header Program as another symbol of how the school food environment encouraged high-calorie, low nutrient value eating habits for students already at risk of diet-related diseases.

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 the Los Angeles County Nutrition Program joined the collaborative effort to advocate for the resolution. Thanks in part to their related organizing efforts and their work through the Child Nutrition Advisory Committee, the HSFC effectively worked with the collaborative partners, which now also included the two State LEAF (Linking Education Activity and Food) pilot schools, Venice and Monroe High Schools, to assist board members Hayes and Canter in developing support for the Healthy Beverage Resolution. In its final version, the resolution effectively prohibited sugary beverages, including sodas, from being sold in LAUSD vending machines, student stores, cafeterias, and all other locations on campus accessible to students. Although limited to certain restrictions regarding the drinks offered through those competitive foods venues (e.g., limits on sugar content), the resolution nevertheless



Sugar-filled mason jars given to board members

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 campaign. HSFC members also organized a "Board Member Gift Delivery" the day before the August 15th Health and Safety Committee Hearing. Ten coalition members delivered each board member a full-sized mason jar of refined sugar representing the amount a teenager consumes in a week by drinking two regular sodas a day. This organizing action impacted several board members who were astounded by the quantity of sugar students consumed in just a one-week period. Board Member Canter, in fact, brought her jar of sugar to the board meeting on August 27th 2002 where the soda resolution was to be voted on; a visual representation that later appeared in the documentary "Supersize Me."



At the August 27th board meeting, several hundred activists, including students, parents, community members, and the collaborative partners, assembled at the board offices to advocate for and demonstrate the overwhelming support for the resolution. Several advocates testified in support of the resolution including students and parents. Many more activists attended than could be accommodated in the board room and continued the demonstrations outside the building.



School board member Marlene Canter at HSFC meeting

After several hours of intense debate, with the LAUSD Superintendent and a key L.A. County Supervisor revealing that they were diabetics concerned about their own health, and following the defeat of an amendment to require a fiscal impact analysis, the resolution passed unanimously.

International media attention brought the battle over the “soda ban” in Los Angeles – and the revenue generated for student activities by selling sweetened beverages - into living rooms and newspapers around the world. But although a major policy victory had been accomplished, the struggles around school food would only intensify.

2003-2005: Breakthrough Policies – The Obesity Prevention Motion and Cafeteria Improvement Motion

During the next three years, two more crucial school food resolutions were passed, including an “Obesity Prevention” measure and a subsequent Cafeteria Improvement motion. A new round of student and parent organizing took place, and, when combined with the policy expertise of the healthy school food groups, also helped shape the specific resolutions that emerged. What became clear, after the soda ban was enacted, was the need to extend the ban to cover the full range of junk food options, as well as to begin to address the question of the cafeteria food as well, despite significant resistance on both fronts, due to cost and bureaucratic constraints. Thus, the focus continued to be on extending the policy breakthroughs first made through the Soda Ban.

The Obesity Prevention Motion

As the advocates knew, eliminating sugary beverages and sodas and replacing them with water and 100% juice, dairy and nondairy milk and sports drinks was a major change for the district and the beverage industry. But more was needed to generate significant changes in the health habits and long-term weight maintenance among Los Angeles students. Thus, advocates immediately began working on the next generation of changes.

The same collaborative partners involved in the soda ban campaign reconvened to identify nutrient standards for snack foods and la carte items. Research was undertaken that included, among other research undertaken, an assessment of product specifications and data on student purchasing habits in order to craft a snack and a la carte food policy. Students from the two LEAF high schools (Venice and Monroe) became part of the research team, analyzing nutrition labels on snack foods found in the vending machines to better identify nutrient recommendations for the resolutions to be introduced.

The collaborative partners regularly brought together students, parents, teachers and LAUSD Nutrition Network administrators to evaluate potential changes to cafeteria programs that would support developing good nutritional habits. Partners maintained constant communication with Board Member Canter's staff to update them on the next round of nutritional standards, discuss implementation of the beverage motion, and plan political and organizing strategies to secure support of other Board Members and the Superintendent and to ensure media coverage. The collaborative partners also participated in a Little Yellow Bus tour of school cafeterias sponsored by the LAUSD Food Services Branch to observe best practices and problem areas.

By September 2003, there was agreement by all partners on a proposal for snack standards, with the popular, high-fat, high-calorie 'Flamin' Hot Cheetos' as the symbol of the need for a new ordinance. Divisions remained among the diverse advocates about which cafeteria changes should be required by the LAUSD Board in the face of significant opposition from the district's food services branch leadership.

Student voices facilitated by HSFC were critical to the final compromise, as students noted the ubiquity of chips and ice cream bars in contrast



HSFC youth members

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 this during this campaign was less pronounced, but it was clear that the breakthrough soda ban policy had been significantly extended.

The Cafeteria Improvement Motion

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

scaled back several proposals, but the core principle was retained in the version adopted by the Board in December 2005: namely, to provide more appealing and healthier meals in order to attract more students while adopting a health and nutrition mission for school food and ensure student integration and input in the implementation process.

A Los Angeles Times article described this motion as the next generation of school nutrition advocacy by going beyond sodas and snacks to improve the lunch entrees with LAUSD standards that exceeded USDA specifications. Similar to the two previous resolutions, the Cafeteria Improvement Motion passed unanimously, without much of the drama and the tension of the soda ban fight. In crucial ways, the Cafeteria Improvement Motion elevated what the healthy food advocates identified as the critical missing piece in the nearly four years of organizing and policy development: the shift from getting the bad foods out (particularly the competitive foods) while making the cafeteria food more appealing, healthier, and ultimately less stigmatized.

Provisions of the three breakthrough school food policies

These three resolutions have now formed the basis of major changes in how school food services would operate and what new choices would be available. To summarize, some of the key provisions include:

2002 THE HEALTHY BEVERAGE RESOLUTION

- Effectively bans sodas and other high sugar content drinks by specifying which authorized beverages are for sale during the school day
- Allows for non-approved beverages for fundraisers sold one half hour before and after the school day
- Establishes audit provisions to monitor compliance
- Creates a new working group, working in conjunction with the CNAC, to review current school food policies and their implementation

2003 THE OBESITY PREVENTION MOTION

- Establishes nutrient standards limiting fat, saturated fat, trans fat, sugar, and sodium content for food sold in vending machines, student stores, a la carte sales, and for fundraisers taking place during the school day
- Establishes portion size limits for snack and sweet items such as snacks, etc.
- Provides a vegetarian option for the school lunch
- Established the cafeteria as a place of learning
- Provides for increased variety and availability for fruits and vegetables at school lunch, including through farm to school projects, and a salad bar to be available at all high schools in 2 years and all middle schools in 4 years
- Eliminates contracts and relationships with branded fast-food products
- Increases the number of secondary students selecting complete balanced meals
- Creates a pilot program for offering soy milk

- Provides for second chance breakfast at all schools within 2 years
- Improves nutrition education in the district

2005 CAFETERIA IMPROVEMENT MOTION

- Creates a Cafeteria Improvement Committee and sets goals to increase participation in breakfast, lunch, and summer nutrition programs
- Ensures appropriate lunch times and identifies steps to add additional lunch periods, as one of the methods to relieve overcrowded sites, and as part of increased participation goals
- Upgrades and/or creates new kitchen facilities at existing and new school sites
- Adds specific nutritional standards, including for fat, sugar and salt content as well as eliminating any trans fat for products provided through cafeteria procurement contracts standards
- Facilitates students directly engaging and monitoring food choices
- Initiates partnerships with local chefs to improve cooking practices and dining area design
- Develops a process to obtain a computerized cafeteria point of sale system to eliminate stigma by completely replacing meal tickets

While far reaching, the provisions are notable in that the strategies for implementation, even when identified, are not specifically spelled out, whether at the District or at the school level. As Board member Canter remarked to the advocates after the third resolution was passed, “the real work must now begin.” It is also important to mention that these policies have helped shape nutrition policies adopted at the state and national levels.

2006-2009: Focus on Implementation

When the third motion was passed in December 2005, both school board members and student and parent advocates promoting a healthy school food environment felt the basic language and guidelines for action, in the form of the three resolutions, was now in place to significantly change the cafeteria food as well as place limits and ultimately seek to eliminate all unhealthy competitive foods (whether food sold in vending machines, school stores, or through fundraisers). However, advocates knew that implementation was not easily accomplished and long standing practices represented both an organizational and cultural barrier and that hard outreach and organizing work was needed to ensure that the language of the motions translated to real improvement on the ground. From the outset, it was clear that the initial implementation of the resolutions was uneven at best and completely lacking in some key areas. Student surveys carried out in 2005-2006, generated through the HSFC, indicated lack of compliance or partial implementation, such as banned items still for sale in vending machines, no vegetarian options offered, or not enough time to eat. HSFC student and parent organizers, along with CFPA, the District’s Business Manager and Board Member Canter’s Office developed the Cafeteria Improvement Committee structure and objectives. The Committee began to function as a source of information and feedback for the District

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 filled by a healthy school food advocate.

Organizing at the District Level

In January 2008, the HSFC hosted a gathering, with school board member Marlene Canter and more than fifty students and parents representing various schools, to celebrate the second anniversary of the passage of the Cafeteria Improvement Motion. The gathering noted how

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 influencing 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 staff 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 staffing of the Food Services Division that had helped create a new openness to collaboration with students and parents in bringing about changes identified through the organizing and monitoring that had taken place.



HSFC nutritional training

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 staff. 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 offered 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 identified 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 significantly. 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 and increased availability of fresh-cut vegetables and sliced fruits. Student organizers helped influence utilizing more attractive signage and posters and other marketing to identify the better choices now available. As a result of the increased attention and changes implemented

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.

Organizing at Schools

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 food operation could be targeted for change, but the degree of student interest in such change. Other similar organizing initiatives, became the calling card for student and parent engagement in transforming the school food environment.

Changes at several of the 20 targeted schools also began to take place. In some schools, new salad bars were developed. Although not organized as farm to school-type programs, the new salad bars nevertheless presented opportunities for healthier food and could also be seen as laying the groundwork for a more expansive (and potentially more successful, given earlier pilot experiences) school lunch option. Other changes included a focus on improved customer service to students participating in the program. Additional changes also focused on the development of multiple lunch periods to reduce long lines which also resulted in increased participation; and reducing junk food options for after school snack periods by establishing more snack programs within the after school programs offered in the District. Individual parents at some schools sites began to assume a leadership role, working with parent groups involved in school fundraising through sales of unhealthy snacks, either right

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.

Improved relationships and better communication between students and the school cafeteria manager; monitoring by parents that focused on availability and quality of new menu choices; and the development of bilingual menu posters (including pictures taken by the parents of new food options) and fliers to help create awareness of changes taking place. Other activities have included nutrition education facilitated by special guests and child health sessions with pediatricians, healthy and affordable cooking demonstrations and group trips to local farmer's markets as well as Cafeteria tours, to observe lunch; one of these in company of Board member Marlene Canter where the group was received by the school principal and Food Services Deputies and



Menu photo gallery activity

where parents asked questions after eating lunch. Another initiative has been to ensure the development of communication between cafeteria managers at the school site and the school community, especially parents and students. At a number of schools, organizers worked with parents to set up simple venues where managers were introduced to parents during parent council meetings, or at the regular meetings with principals.

Teachers also became engaged in creating a new awareness about healthy food, such as a high school Art teacher who developed a poster series with her students on food and health. One organizing event at a school even included a "Know Your School Food Rights" workshop. At an elementary school, parents, teachers, and community members, in conjunction with HSFC and CFJ and the Southland Farmers' Market Association, made plans to develop a farmers' market on the school grounds, the culmination of a series of healthy food events that included a fresh food fair and other fresh food promotion events.

Organizing in the Community

What has distinguished the work at the individual school sites as well as at the District level has been the intensive organizing work involved, the increase in understanding of food and health issues, and the ability to empower students and parents to not only take action but

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 & Justice, participated with two other community based partners, Esperanza Community Housing Corporation (and their nutrition-based promotoras program), and the Blazers Youth organization in Project CAFE (Community Action on Food Environments). Project CAFE was designed to undertake a series of community and school food assessments to document and assess the nature of the food environments in three low income communities and five schools and to establish an agenda for action to address those issues. Complementing the work of HSFC at LAUSD school sites and the District level, Project CAFE's food assessments identified a need to transform community food environments that included most prominently fast food restaurants, liquor and convenience stores, and vendors selling food high in sugar, fat, and salt. Several of these places were also within a few blocks of the schools where HSFC had been organizing, compounding the issue of how food environments could best be changed.

As a result of the CAFE assessments, it became clear that the school food organizing necessarily needed to have a community organizing dimension, which also became a key aspect of the parent and student leadership development. The community food assessment strategy complemented the types of school food assessments and surveys that had been utilized, with both providing a means to inform, educate, and ultimately develop new leadership skills. At the school and community level, it had become clear that bringing about change had multiple dimensions and required a layered approach involving engagement, education, organizing, and action.

Elaborating and Implementing Policy Changes

As HSFC entered its eighth year, it could point to significant accomplishments based on policy and institutional change and the development of a generation of new leaders in the struggle for healthier food and healthier schools. Several of the student leaders, many of them from low income families and students of color, have now graduated and some have entered college, including one key leader who entered Occidental College in fall 2008. Many of the parents have remained active and have also become engaged in parallel issues about such community needs as lack of park space and recreational opportunities, environmental hazards, and poor housing conditions. HSFC has also participated in the need for a stronger commitment to physical activity at LAUSD schools, helping facilitate the passage of a

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.



Brown rice bowl

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.