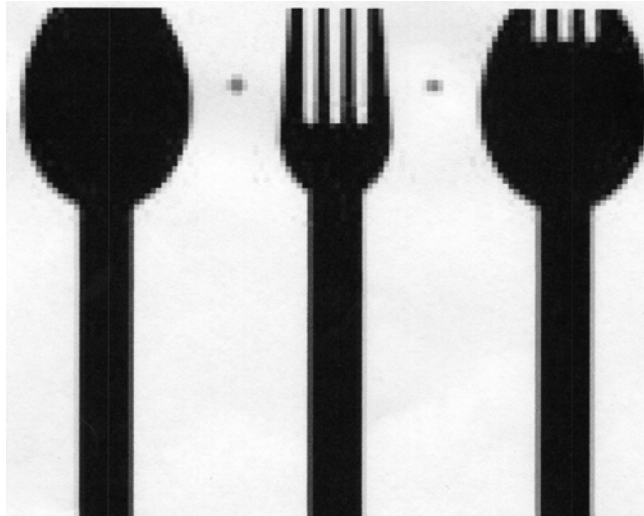


“SPORKS” FAIL TO BLOCK NUTRITION PROGRESS AT SONOMA COUNTY SCHOOLS

SUMMARY

The Sonoma County Grand Jury studied the efforts of our public schools to encourage healthy behavior and good nutrition. Within a diverse sample of twelve schools, we found that most staff and faculty were committed to providing well balanced, nutritional meals for their students, encouraging more physical activity, and phasing out less healthy foods. We found ample evidence that positive changes are happening as a result of creative and cooperative work among parents, teachers, administrators and staff. Good things are happening in our public schools!



Regular Spoon
and Fork

“Spork”

BACKGROUND

Trends in obesity and childhood diabetes have received media attention and have been the subject of many studies at both the federal and local level. Our own observations found that the food served in Sonoma County public schools is being carefully modified to qualify for federal funding, based on a comprehensive new document, a [Wellness Policy](#). That and other significant steps include:

- 2004 - The Federal Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act required that each local education agency receiving federal funds for school lunches establish [Local School Wellness Policies](#) and begin implementation by 2005.
- 2005 - The California State Superintendent of Public Instruction proclaimed in his Sacramento State of Education Address, "It is time to promote and support a culture of health and fitness in our schools"
- 2008 - The Sonoma County Department of Health Services, in collaboration with major Sonoma County hospital organizations published a report entitled [Community Health Needs Assessment](#). One of the findings of this extensive assessment was that "Sonoma County Schools must be part of the solution to solving overweight and obesity, through education, physical activity programs and established nutritional standards for foods offered in school".
- 2010 - The First Lady began to promote a "Let's Move" campaign directed at improving children's health. The campaign includes federal financial incentives for schools to further improve nutrition.

REASON FOR STUDY

Our purpose was to provide an independent review of the food and lunchtime recreation in Sonoma County Schools. Policies often look good on paper but may or may not be carried out at the grass roots level. For this reason we decided to actually visit a sampling of Sonoma County Schools to eat with the students in their normal setting in addition to talking with staff, teachers, students and administrators.

In addition to the meals themselves, we were interested in studying the schools' commitment to encouraging healthy physical activity during the unstructured portion of lunch period time. Finally, we tried to judge whether there is likely to be any indirect positive effect on good nutritional practices at home.

THE STUDY

The major elements of our study were:

- Reviewed current literature on this subject through the internet and print media.
- Reviewed numerous school districts' Wellness Policies, giving attention to how they were adapted by staff, parents and administrators to fit the needs of each of the districts.
- Conducted interviews with food service personnel, school administrators, teachers, parent volunteers and students.
- Attended a Wellness Policy Review meeting at a local elementary school that included kitchen staff, parents, teachers and administrators.
- Ate lunch with the students at a dozen schools from diverse geographic locations including Cloverdale, Petaluma, Occidental, Sonoma and Santa Rosa. Our study included nine elementary schools, two high schools and one junior high school.
- Additional criteria used in selecting schools to visit included their ethnic and income diversity, levels of parent involvement and methods of food preparation (prepared on-site, at the district kitchen, or purchased through a commercial vendor). Schools were given less than 24 hours notice of the lunch visits so that Grand Jury members could be more certain that they were having a typical student meal.

FINDINGS

F-1 The Jury found that significant progress is being made by local schools in providing more nutritious food choices to students. Priority is given to serving whole grain foods, fresh fruits and vegetables. Only low fat or fat-free milk is offered. Sodium content is being systematically reduced. School meals are planned to provide less cholesterol and trans fats. Foods are baked, not fried, and are prepared in ways that offer better choices to students.

F- 2 In addition to providing nutritional lunches for their students many of the schools we visited have garden programs which help teach the value of fresh vegetables and fruits in daily nutrition. Schools have daily fresh fruit choices. Many of the schools have salad bars from which their students can choose various fresh fruits and vegetables to create individual salads. In some cases the fruits and vegetables come from the school gardens.

F-3 Several schools had programs through which they educated parents regarding good nutrition and other aspects of healthy behavior. Additionally, vending machines containing soda and candy have been eliminated as lunch time options.

F-4 Schools provided a positive environment for the lunch period. Students were given adequate time to eat (usually 20 minutes) in a safe setting with provisions made for slower eaters where necessary.

F-5 Due to budget considerations, the only eating utensil most schools provide is a light weight plastic "spork". The children and the Jurors disliked the combination spoon-forks and found them very difficult to use. We felt that something better is needed.

F-6 The jury found wide interest in further, continuous improvement of nutritional and physical activity opportunities for children in Sonoma County Public Schools. Individual districts appear to have on going administrative assessment systems in place that will capture and react to the views of the public, parents, and administrators.

COMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Grand Jury would like to commend each of the school administrators, superintendents, teachers, kitchen staff, volunteers, and especially the students at the schools we visited for their participation in this study.

CONCLUSION

It was our conclusion that Sonoma County Schools are committed to establishing healthy behaviors among their students. We found evidence that they are pursuing this goal in a variety of innovative ways; through student input, choices of food, student participation in food preparation, recycling, and in some instances growing part of their food in school gardens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the public notice and applaud the remarkable progress being made in Sonoma County Schools related to providing healthy meals and encouraging more physical activity. These changes are the result of effective concern and cooperation among students, parents, teachers, cafeteria staff and administrators in the Sonoma County public education system.

We recommend that districts continue and expand communication with staff, students, parents and the community regarding Wellness Policies and the impact of these policies on students' eating habits and physical activity levels. Active family participation is a very important factor in the continuing success of these innovations. Parents play a pivotal role by incorporating these changes so that they become lifetime habits.

We recommend that this good news be recognized, publicly applauded and supported over the next couple of decades. It will take this level of sustained attention to change a generation and start building a more healthy society.

Required Responses:

Since this is an informational report there are no required responses.

Suggested Responses:

Continuing community participation in neighborhood schools to maintain the momentum on this important subject.