

New school nutrition law going into effect
Gregory B. Hladky, Capitol Bureau Chief
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HARTFORD — Kids across the state will be encountering Connecticut's new school nutrition law for the first time this week, but many students may find that not all that much has changed in their lunchrooms.

High-sugar sodas and sports drinks will be banned from vending machines and school stores by the new law. But school officials in various communities say that, with the exception of more fruits and vegetables, their menus won't be much different.

Worries that the loss of soda in vending machines might result in a dramatic drop in school revenues also appear to be fading, largely because the new law provides a 10-cent-per-meal state reimbursement for schools that meet the new state nutritional standards.

New Haven, for example, expects to get about \$250,000 in added revenue from the meal reimbursement, while school districts such as Cheshire anticipate about \$40,000 in additional funding from the program.

Susan Fiore, nutrition education coordinator for the state Department of Education, said the law's biggest impact may be on how schools and school organizations conduct fund-raisers involving food sales.

Fiore said school fund-raising organizers may have to change their sale items from things like candy to more nutritious snacks or get exemptions from their local school boards.

"The law changes how we look at doing (school fund-raisers) but it doesn't mean they're totally banned," Fiore said.

The intent of the law is to get high-calorie, fattening foods and drinks out of the schools. The measure approved by the General Assembly this year was largely a response to growing concerns about the obesity epidemic among American children.

Fairfield's Board of Education last week became one of the first in the state to vote against participation in the state school nutrition program. Several school board members criticized the law as too vague and too restrictive on such activities as school fund raising. Fairfield stands to lose about \$52,000 this year by not taking part in the meal reimbursement program.

By not participating, a school system doesn't have to meet the nutritional standards for the breakfast and lunch it serves, but the law still prohibits a school from selling sodas and junk food in vending machines.

Fiore said Connecticut school districts have until Sept. 15 to notify the state whether they intend to participate in the school nutrition program.

Many schools in Connecticut were already moving on their own toward healthier food policies before the new law was passed, and that trend appears likely to moderate the impact of the new law.

"We revised our menu last year," Ansonia School Superintendent Edward C. Favolise said. "I'm looking at the new regulations, and I don't see much impact."

"The greatest impact is going to be selling soft drinks," Favolise said, adding that Ansonia's estimated state meal reimbursement of about \$33,000 should more than cover any losses from soda sales.

Madeleine C. Diker, food service director for Cheshire's schools, said her school cafeterias "will include whole-grain pastas and more fruits and vegetables" as a result of the new nutrition standards.

"With our wellness policy, we were already moving in that direction," Diker said. "As a result, our lunch menus will not be greatly changed." She said that Cheshire school cafeterias "nearly doubled our produce" use in the past three years.

Diker said she doesn't expect that Cheshire will have to ban traditional types of cake sale fundraisers, even if the items for sale contain more sugars and fats than allowed under the state's new guidelines. She said the new law "has given the board (of education) the flexibility to make exceptions" for such things as fund-raisers.

Under the law, a local school board could give approval for such fund-raising food sales as long as the items aren't sold during school hours and aren't sold from vending machines or school stores.

Robin Golden, chief operating officer for New Haven's Board of Education, said New Haven "took all the junk food and sodas out of the schools" two years ago when the city began its own healthy kids initiative.

"We're looking forward to this because we've already done about 99 percent of what we need to do," Golden said. Items such as French fries, potato chips and high-sugar cookies were eliminated from New Haven school lunch programs when the healthy kids initiative was begun, she said.

The biggest change New Haven students may notice is that high-sugar and artificially sweetened sports drinks won't be available from school vending machines any longer, said Golden.

The new law will require that banned sodas and sports drinks be replaced by water, milk or juice beverages.

Even though many fruits and nuts are naturally high in sugar and fats, they are not banned under the new state nutritional guidelines.

Gregory B. Hladky can be contacted at gghladky@nhregister.com, or (860) 524-0719.