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In New York Schools, Whole Milk Is Cast From the Menu

By David M Herszenhorn

For generations of children, a serving of whole milk, customarily in a red and white carton, has been as synonymous with school as a yellow No. 2 pencil. When President Harry S. Truman signed the National School Lunch Program into law in 1946, a half pint of milk was one of five dietary staples required by the bill.



James Estrin/The New York Times

The lunch line at P.S. 28 in the Bronx, where 1 percent and skim milk are the only beverages. Last Friday, with chocolate milk offered, the school served 1,006 cartons, including all 420 containers of chocolate.

But children today are fat, or at least too many of them are, and to cut the risks of obesity, diabetes and other health problems, New York City — the nation's largest school district — has decided to cut whole milk from the menu.

That feat, no small one in a system that serves a half-million half pints of milk a day, is already under way, with whole milk banished from cafeterias in the Bronx and in Manhattan. To the ire of the dairy industry, which has lobbied fiercely against the change, the other boroughs are following suit and, by the end of this month, officials say, whole milk will be gone for good.

One percent and skim milk, though historically less popular, will still be served, and, to the great relief of many young palates, chocolate skim milk will remain an option in most schools, despite the misgivings of some doctors and nutritionists. In the Bronx, where local health advocates led the charge to expel whole milk from the school system, some schools are offering chocolate milk only one day a week.

City education officials, including the schools system's head chef, say the decision to eliminate whole milk is part of a larger effort to improve nutrition for the city's nearly 1.1 million public schoolchildren.

"We got rid of white bread; you'll never see any white bread in our schools — it's all whole-wheat bread, frankfurter buns, hamburger buns," said Martin Oestreicher, the executive director of school support services who oversees school food. "We reformulated a lot of items. It all goes in the context of trying to cut down the obesity index in our kids."

New York is not the first school district to shift away from whole milk; Los Angeles, the nation's second-biggest district, did so in 2000, and some states, including Illinois, New Jersey and Connecticut, have adopted or are considering rules barring or limiting whole milk.

But New York City's decision to ban low-fat flavored milks as well, allowing only chocolate skim as an alternative, makes it one of the strictest policies in the country.

And in the school system that purchases more milk than any other in the United States, and that last year received \$340 million in federal reimbursements for school food, a change in the milk menu has high stakes — for the school district and the dairy industry alike.

Before moving forward with the change, city education officials double-checked federal regulations to make sure their reimbursements under the federal school food program would not be jeopardized. (They would have been if the city had decided to switch to soy.)

The American Dairy Association, whose interests in milk consumption are not small, urged the city to expand its offerings of sweetened low-fat milk, which is available in vanilla and strawberry as well as chocolate. School officials ultimately rebuffed that push, but decided to keep skim chocolate milk.

Dairy industry officials warn that milk consumption will drop because children will find skim or 1 percent milk less tasty. They said that they had begun a study of milk consumption in those New York schools that had phased out whole milk, but that the city cut them off from access to the schools, ending the study.

"The industry is definitely concerned," said Rick Naczi, vice president of school marketing for Dairy Management Inc., the parent of the American Dairy Association, which represents dairy farmers. "If it was a small district experimenting somewhere, it wouldn't get as much attention."

Local health officials debated the question of whether eliminating whole milk to reduce fat and calorie consumption was worth the risk that children would not drink any milk, reducing their calcium consumption. Federal guidelines recently raised the recommended amount of milk to three full servings per day.

But with so many children overweight and facing health risks, many medical experts, nutritionists and school nurses say every little step is worth the effort. Skim milk has eight fewer grams of fat per container than whole milk and 54 fewer calories. Chocolate skim milk also has eight fewer grams of fat, but only 20 fewer calories, while 1 percent milk has 5.5 fewer grams of fat and 28 fewer calories.

"There is a huge amount of obesity in the school," said Jacqueline Kelderhouse, a nurse practitioner at a health clinic inside Public School 28 in the Bronx, which is run by Montefiore Medical Center's School Health Program. "We do insulin levels, we do cholesterol panels — we don't just look at the child and say your child is obese."

Another issue for the city was its federal reimbursements. School officials worried that if fewer students drank milk, which is the only beverage available on the lunch line, fewer might each lunch at all, jeopardizing federal money. Federal reimbursements depend on students' taking at least three items from approved categories. Milk qualifies as one item.

Officials say they are monitoring schools that have already stopped offering whole milk and that consumption is down approximately 5 percent. At schools that stopped serving chocolate milk, consumption on those days is down 15 percent. But they said there was no drop in the number of meals being served.

In an effort to improve nutrition last year, the city schools briefly offered skim milk in chocolate, vanilla and strawberry, but officials decided to keep only chocolate. Jose Baez, 10, a fourth grader at P.S. 28, which now serves chocolate milk only on Fridays, said that he loved the new low-fat milk, but that some classmates were upset. "They said, 'Oh, my God, they took away the chocolate milk and the strawberry milk,'" Jose said. "They started complaining."

Although city education officials said they had planned for some time to get rid of whole milk, decisive action this year came only after a grass-roots efforts in the Bronx that began with officials at the Montefiore clinics and at two community groups, Bronx Health Reach and Bronx Healthy Hearts.

The groups, working with school officials in the Bronx, developed an education kit to teach children about the healthier milk. David Appel, the physician who runs Montefiore's school health program, said, "The question is, can we get healthy habits that are life-long, life-sustaining?"

The milk industry fought back. Mr. Naczi said industry officials and nutrition experts had met with city officials and written to them "trying to get them to reconsider." He said the industry was concerned about how quickly the city had moved to cut whole milk, especially because whole milk has a larger market share in New York City, 37 percent, compared with 30 percent nationwide.

"Milk consumption in this country is in a 20-year decline because of competition from soft drinks; obesity is on the increase," Mr. Naczi said. "I don't know how you can take a decreasing graph and blame obesity on this product."

Bob Murray, a professor of pediatrics at Columbus Children's Hospital in Ohio and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, said flavored low-fat milk was preferable to no milk.

At P.S. 28 yesterday, children said they were quite happy with the new milk, although the preference for chocolate was clear. On a recent Tuesday, according to cafeteria records, the school served a total of 942 cartons of milk — 684 low-fat and 258 skim — but had dozens of cartons left over. Last Friday, with chocolate milk available, the school served 1,006 containers, but all 420 cartons of chocolate milk were taken.

"They took it all," said ChrisCarol Tucker, a school food supervisor. "Because they like the chocolate."