



## Teens want healthier food

**By** Jennifer Gollan, IJ reporter

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School survey finds students would eat fruit, salads if available Many Marin students would choose salad over fries and juice over soda if they were available on their school menus, according to a survey released yesterday.

About 53 percent of the 550 high school students responding to the online survey said they would eat at school, instead of at off-campus restaurants, if additional food choices were available, and about a third of the students requested that one of three items be added to school menus, including fruit salad, juice, or salad.

About 26 percent of 369 high-schoolers who responded said they now frequently purchase food from their cafeterias; 23 percent said they sometimes do.

"It is obvious this is a crucial issue that needs to be addressed now and in the future," said Alicea Cock-Esteb, a member of the Marin County Youth Commission. The panel, composed of students ages 12 to 23, conducted the survey with help from two other organizations. Those groups included the Marin County Health and Human Services Department's Nutrition/Wellness Program, which promotes healthy eating and physical activity; and the Youth Leadership Institute, a Marin- and San Francisco-based organization aimed at encouraging youth involvement in the community.

The survey findings come as local educators and health officials face mounting pressure to address Marin's soaring childhood obesity rate.

About 40 percent of children ages 2 to 17 in Marin County are overweight or obese, which is higher than the state average of 33 percent for children of the same age group, according to a random telephone survey in 2000. The survey, by San Francisco-based Field Research Corp., called 700 children under age 18 for the Marin County Health and Human Services Department.

Nationwide, the U.S. Surgeon General recently warned, the obesity rate has reached epidemic proportions.

"Many of the results (of the study) come as no surprise," said Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Petaluma, in a brief address yesterday before about 20 educators and students at Novato High School. "Their (students') attendance is better and they do better in school when their stomachs are full - especially full of nutritious food."

Woolsey is the top Democrat on the U.S. House Education subcommittee that handles school nutrition programs.

In July 2003, Woolsey joined Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, and Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., in introducing legislation, H.R. 2987, which calls on the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to work with the National Academy of Science Institute of Medicine to set nutritional standards for the items sold in vending machines, a la carte meals, and other school venues aside from school meal programs. The bill is under consideration by the House Education Reform subcommittee.

In February, Woolsey introduced another resolution, H.R. 3780, designed to help working families by providing universal breakfast for K-12 public and private schools, as well as expanding child care, helping employers provide benefits for all their employees and improving the Family Medical Leave Act. The bill is under consideration by a number of House committees, among them Education and the Workforce, Financial Services, and Administration and Government Reform.

The Marin study also found more than one-third of high school students surveyed said they skipped meals for lack of time; nearly 80 percent of high school students said they knew someone who was concerned about their weight; nearly a third reported they were on a diet; and a third said they would like to improve school nutrition policies.

"The national epidemic of obesity will be solved when we get involved," said Larry Meredith, director of the Marin County Health and Human Services Department, adding that soaring obesity rates were attributable in part to the wide availability of "cheap and empty food."

Maureen Sedonaen, president and CEO of the Youth Leadership Institute, said the survey had far-reaching implications.

"This study says that young people in Marin want healthier choices and that if they were provided them, they would want them. Like other issues, Marin is a leader in the rates of availability (of foods). If we can't do it here, then where can we do it? We should be able to implement the healthy choices."

Mary Jane Burke, superintendent of the Marin County Office of Education, said schools play an intrinsic role in developing healthy eating habits for kids.

"If you look at the purpose of schools being able to prepare students for life, being healthy is part of what it really means to be educated," she said.

Contact Jennifer Gollan via e-mail at [jgollan@marinij.com](mailto:jgollan@marinij.com)