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So Bake Sales Are Taboo? Try Selling Hand Sanitizer

By JENNIFER MILLER



Welch's Fruit Snacks, an item on a list of approved snacks for the public schools, are sold for \$1 each at a Queens high school.

Lynn Carlson, who teaches law and history at a Queens public school, could once count on bake sales and candy drives to raise thousands of dollars for her annual trip with students to Washington or Boston.

That was before the New York City Department of Education, as part of an anti-obesity drive, began restricting what could be sold in machines and in fund-raising events held in schools. Out were brownies; in were granola bars. Out were chocolate chip cookies; in were gummy fruit snacks. Bake sales began to seem like little more than trips to a nutritionally correct vending machine.

The only truly successful item on the cleared list was brown-sugar Pop Tarts. Ms. Carlson ordered some from the city's vendor, which charged 60 cents for a package of two, with the students reselling them for a dollar, she said. But last fall, Ms. Carlson said, the Pop Tarts came just one per package, and still cost her 60 cents, almost double what she would pay if she were to buy them at the supermarket.

“That, to me, is ridiculous,” she said. The students’ fund-raising committee agreed, refusing to sell their peers a Pop Tart that cost \$1. So now they are without their best-selling item. “They understand supply and demand,” Ms. Carlson said.

Schools and student clubs around the city have been wrestling with the regulations, sometimes scornfully, since they were handed down in 2009. Snacks on an approved list have no more than 200 calories per serving, no more than 200 milligrams of sodium and no more than 35 percent of their calories from fat. Other approved foods include Trix cereal bars, Baked Lay’s chips and Squeezable Fruit.

Students could still hold bake sales — though little baking was actually involved — as long as they held them outside the cafeteria and stuck to the list of approved foods. Parent-teacher associations received an exemption: once a month, they could hold a sale in the school with any food they wanted.

The mother of one student in a Manhattan school said student-run, illicit bake sales there were frequent. She asked to remain anonymous and, like Ms. Carlson, did not want the school named. “After 2009, it was cease and desist and everyone stopped selling all food,” she said. “But once the dust settled, people started to sell a little here and a little there.”

That mother, who has been active in her school’s parents’ association, said she sympathized with the city’s position. “Their hearts are in right place,” she said. “Kids are overweight. And as a quasi-germaphobe, I don’t know what conditions those brownies were baked under.”

But the fund-raising barriers have added unnecessary stress. “There’s nothing as easy as bake sales for kids or school communities to do,” she said. “You put a call out for some baked goods and people will always deliver.”

In an e-mailed statement, Marge Feinberg, an Education Department spokeswoman, said the department had struck a balance between fund-raising needs and health.

“Our schools have made good nutrition and wellness a priority, and with more than 40 percent of public school children overweight or obese, these lessons are critical for a healthy lifestyle,” Ms. Feinberg said.

Ms. Carlson said she knew that other schools simply ignored the rules. But she wanted to set a good example for her students. “If the chancellor says something, you follow it,” Ms. Carlson said.

But following the rules is not easy. Department regulations about different types of fund-raising, when and where snack sales can take place, and how items can be delivered can read like a legal document. In a “frequently asked questions” guide the department posted online, schools are told that food sold at fund-raisers does not have to be bought from the city’s approved vendor, Answer Vending, which supplies

all school snack machines. But the next sentence says that “only the D.O.E. vendor can deliver the items to the school.”

Some schools take that to mean that buying from, say, Costco is fine as long as Costco is not delivering the items to the school. Other schools, like Ms. Carlson’s, simply require that everything be bought from Answer Vending, to eliminate any possible trouble.

The department statement says, “Schools may use vendors other than Answer Vending, but they must be reviewed and certified to ensure student and school safety.”

Answer Vending’s president, Tom Murn, disputed Ms. Carlson’s claim that his company had previously sold her Pop Tarts in packs of two. But he acknowledged that teachers could probably find cheaper prices elsewhere. He also noted that under his company’s contract with the city, schools receive commissions from the snacks sold in its machines. The company gives each school 28 percent of gross sales each year; in the last three years, Ms. Carlson’s school has received \$59,401.34.

At Middle School 51 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, the parent coordinator, Audrey Komaroff, expressed frustrations similar to Ms. Carlson’s. “The vendor prices are staying the same and the size of the packages are getting smaller,” Ms. Komaroff said.

She also took issue with some of the items on the approved list, which did not seem to her to be all that wholesome. Her school’s students hold more traditional bake sales at the end of the lunch hour, but at the park across the street, she said, outside the reach of the Education Department. All the proceeds go directly to charity, like the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, she said. “We felt that it was kosher, as long as it wasn’t inside the school,” Ms. Komaroff said.

In Queens, Ms. Carlson’s students stopped selling most snacks altogether. Instead, they hawked a “red bag of stuff” during cold and flu seasons: tissues, lip balm, hand sanitizer and, from Answer Vending, a package of gummy fruit snacks. Even so, some of her students could not sell enough bags to pay for the trip to Boston last week. To fill the minimum number of slots, Ms. Carlson and her colleagues she and her colleagues in a social studies program opened registration to other students.

Many students got to go, which the teachers are happy about, but they feel sorry for their own students who could not go. “The trip is supposed to be a giveback,” Ms. Carlson said. “They’ve worked so hard.”