

## Sorry, Cupcake, You're Not Welcome in Class

As schools across the nation target student obesity, traditional treats are under attack. Some educators say they've come up with alternatives for celebrations: carrots, reading and special seat cover

By Seema Mehta, Times Staff Writer  
September 27, 2006

The days of the birthday cupcake — smothered in a slurry of sticky frosting and with a dash of rainbow sprinkles — may be numbered in schoolhouses across the nation.

Fears of childhood obesity have led schools to discourage and sometimes even ban what were once de rigueur grammar-school treats.

ADVERTISEMENT

**REAL PEOPLE.  
REAL SUCCESS.**

Click here for more information or  
Call Today! 1-888-999-9844.

**REAL PEOPLE.  
REAL SUCCESS.**

Click here for more information or  
Call Today! 1-888-999-9844.

"They can bring carrots," said Laura Ott, assistant to the superintendent of Orange County's Saddleback Valley Unified School District, which this month started allowing non-nutritious classroom treats only three times per year. "A birthday doesn't have to be associated with food."

Such nutritional dictates have ignited a series of mini cupcake rebellions across the country, and Texas has led the way.

The Texas Legislature last year passed the so-called Safe Cupcake amendment, which guarantees parents' right to deliver unhealthful treats to the classroom — such as sweetheart candies on Valentine's Day and candy corn on Halloween. Rep. Jim Dunnam sponsored the legislation after a school in his district booted out a father bringing birthday pizzas to his child's class.

"There's a lot of reasons our kids are getting fat," said Dunnam, a Democrat from Waco. "Cupcakes aren't one of them."

Whether cookies, cakes and other birthday treats at school are the culprits or not, however, the nation's children are definitely packing on the pounds.

Nearly 19% of children ages 6 to 11 and more than 17% of adolescents ages 12 to 19 were overweight in 2003-04, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Extra weight carries added health risks, as seen in the increasing childhood diagnoses of Type 2 diabetes, once considered an adult disease.

Obesity concerns led to California's historic ban on junk-food and soda sales in schools that was signed into law last year. Recent laws by the state and federal government also have prompted school districts throughout the nation to overhaul their nutrition and wellness policies.

"It is a very serious problem, and some districts are looking not only to change what is offered and sold during lunchtime, but what is being provided during" the rest of the school day, said Martin Gonzalez, assistant executive director of the California School Boards Assn.

Districts are looking well beyond school lunches: vending machines, band fundraisers, booster-club sales, treats as rewards from teachers, concession stands at football games — and the ubiquitous birthday parties.

The crackdown on classroom cupcakes and cookies, a tradition fondly remembered by generations of parents, is often the touchiest.

"That's just ridiculous. Give me a break," said Alexandria Coronado, a member of the Orange County Board of Education and mother of a 15-year-old. "People kill for my fudge."

Although nutritionists endorse promoting healthful eating in schools, some question the logic of making any popular food taboo.

"The more you restrict these special foods — cakes or sweets or whatever — they become even more valued by children. It can almost kind of backfire," said Dr. Nancy Krebs, co-chairwoman of the American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force on Obesity. "You want to have a kind of pragmatic approach that sweets and desserts are OK in moderation and not put them up on a pedestal."

When the Santa Clara Unified School District began reviewing its nutrition policy a year ago, public meetings devolved into shouting matches when the staff recommended banning junk food from campus — including high school football games.

"It got very heated," said Roger Barnes, an administrator of the 13,000-student district in Northern California.

In August, the district board decided to ban selling unhealthful food from vending machines and prohibit teachers from dishing out candy as a reward. But it granted a reprieve to birthday cupcake parties and cheese-dripping nachos at football games.

"They're trying to appease everyone," complained Noelani Sallings, who has two daughters in the

district and is running for the school board in November. "American waistlines are getting larger and larger."

Los Angeles is among many neutral territories when it comes to birthday treats at schools.

There's no central directive," said Susan Cox, spokeswoman for the Los Angeles Unified School District. "We try to encourage parents to consider healthy alternatives."

In San Francisco, parents are encouraged to stock classroom parties with fresh fruit, celery sticks stuffed with low-fat cream cheese, whole-wheat pita triangles and hummus, and zucchini bread.

ADVERTISEMENT

**REAL PEOPLE.  
REAL SUCCESS.**

Click here for more information or  
Call Today! 1-888-999-9844.

**REAL PEOPLE.  
REAL SUCCESS.**

Click here for more information or  
Call Today! 1-888-999-9844.

The Westside Union School District in Lancaster decided that all classroom celebrations ought to be consolidated into one party per month and planned to emphasize healthful food in PTA and school newsletters but decided against a ban.

"We figured we'd ease into this slowly," said Marguerite Johnson, director of educational services in the 8,250-student district.

Some schools are going further.

In the Duxbury School District in Massachusetts, parents and educators in the Chandler School Council decided to forgo all classroom treats two years ago, Supt. Eileen Williams said.

"The 'ban on cupcakes' was controversial as it was a long-standing tradition. But most adults could readily see once the new policy was put into place that the new ways of recognizing birthdays in school, including special clothing and seat covers made by the parents, were a delight for the children," she said in an e-mail.

In Orange County, Chaparral Elementary Principal Kevin Rafferty decided to ban celebratory food at his Ladera Ranch school starting this year after hearing about similar efforts at nearby schools.

"There will be parents that maybe are unaware [and] come in with an armful of cupcakes or doughnuts," he said. "I don't relish those kinds of conversations. At the same time, I want to do what's best for kids."

Rafferty and others noted that in a classroom of 30 students, birthdays, Valentine's Day celebrations, Halloween and other events can mean dozens of junk-food-laden parties.

"That's a lot of cupcakes over the year," Rafferty said.

The sheer quantity of treats is what led Mission Viejo's Reilly Elementary School to ban classroom sweets this year. Instead, children celebrate their birthdays by bringing in a favorite book, which they read to their classmates and donate to the classroom library.

"When I first heard about it, I was a little concerned that they wouldn't feel as special," said second-grade teacher Roxane Blake. "But they love it. [And] we're not only celebrating their birthday, we're also celebrating reading."

That much was evident Tuesday, when Cassidy Stewart turned 7. With her classmates sitting on the floor by her feet, Cassidy read "Widget," a tale of a stray dog who makes a home in a warm farmhouse by appeasing half a dozen resident grouchy cats. Then the students danced and sang "Happy Birthday" and she was presented with gifts: a birthday card, sticker and a colorful pencil.

"It's cool, because we don't eat garbage," Cassidy said. "We can have fun and read a book and dance and celebrate."

Plus, she said, there's an M&Ms birthday cake waiting for her at home.

\*

---

*seema.mehta@latimes.com*

\*

Begin text of infobox

Tale of the tape

Nutritional counts for cupcakes vary widely. Information shown below is for a basic frosted homemade cupcake.

Raw carrots

Cupcake

8 baby carrots Serving size

1 cupcake

26	Calories	190
0	Calories from fat	80
0	Total fat, in grams	8
0	Cholesterol, in milligrams	25
0	Sodium, in milligrams	160
6	Total carbohydrates, in grams	26
172%	Vitamin A, daily recommended value	0%
10%	Vitamin C, daily recommended value	0%
2%	Calcium, daily recommended value	4%
0%	Iron, daily recommended value	2%

\*

Source: Dole, Betty Crocker. Graphics reporting by Seema Mehta and Cheryl Brownstein-Santiago