



Carrotoon's A Guide to local Action



Introduction

This guide is a call to action that has evolved out of our study on the status of food and nutrition in schools. There is a close link that exists between the corporatisation of schools, the insidious influence of television advertisements and increasingly unhealthy eating habits and obesity of school children. While everyone has a responsibility to promote good eating habits among school-aged children, with an alarming increase in obesity among school children, it is essential that schools become places for promoting healthy eating. This guide is an attempt to inform the public of the real danger facing children today and to suggest methods to combat this onslaught. It emphasises the role each stakeholder (school management, head of the institution, PTA, students, other welfare organisations, etc.) need to play in the campaign to improve the nutritional status of schools.

Junk Food

There is a growing trend of unhealthy eating habits among school students today. With the spurt of Multi National Food Corporations in our country, junk food comes in deceptively attractive packaging giving the impression that it is 'safe' and even healthy. Through massive billion dollar advertising campaigns, junk food corporations have laid claim to children's imagination and have insinuated themselves into virtually every corner of children's lives. Today children eat food designed for the health of corporate balance sheets rather than the health of their bodies. We all know that junk food is not very healthy. But how bad is it really? The answer might shock you.



Junk food is high in saturated fats, which cause weight gain and heart disease. The high amount of salt increases blood pressure and high levels of sugar cause increased risk of childhood obesity, tooth decay and hyperactivity. Food additives cause allergies, asthma, and hyperactivity. They also may be carcinogenic, toxic to the nervous system and the liver. Some studies show that food with additives causes early puberty, feminisation in men and masculinisation, and infertility in women.

In thousands of schools across the country, corporations and school administrators have got together to market high-calorie, caffeinated, high-sugar food and soft drinks to impressionable children. School children munch their way to bad health without understanding the dire consequences of their action.

Corporate Control

Evidence from a CAG study shows that several schools allow product promotions even in the classrooms. These campaigns are often

conducted in the form of educational programmes where the company organises a talk on some issue and at the end of it distributes free sample of their packed food. How many of us have seen magazine spreads giving information on hair care sponsored by a shampoo conglomerate? Or exercise tips sponsored by a 'health drink'? It is the same kind of promotion targeting children, who might not be able to perceive the marketing strategy in the seemingly informative session.

Schools are unable to say 'no' to corporate sponsorships in many cases as even private schools need additional funds to conduct some of the major events such as school day or sports day, etc. Also members of the PTA who work in these corporate companies who look at the school as a potential market often encourage this.

How should a school react to this situation?

By developing a comprehensive Food and Nutrition Policy (FNP) which is a shared document for all stakeholders that interact with the school. It expresses a common vision of the ethos, status and role of all aspects of food within your school. It encourages all aspects of food to be brought together, clearly, coherently and consistently. The FNP will detail the functioning of the canteen, lay down the school's policy on allowing corporate sponsorships, promotion campaigns, corporate visits and how to regulate food / brands in canteens.



The Food and Nutrition Policy:

The FNP will primarily ensure

- A co-ordinated approach to food;
- That all aspects of food and nutrition in school promote health and well-being of students, staff and visitors to the school;
- Guidelines for course of action to be taken to promote health in schools and reduce unhealthy eating;
- Equality of access for all;
- And reinforce appropriate messages relating to food and nutrition, e.g., ensuring consistency between the formal curriculum and food provision, emphasising healthy eating messages;
- Parents have information on all aspects of food in school;
- And show that the school is caring to all stakeholders, and the wider community, by making a public statement of the values to which the school is committed;
- The school communicates a shared vision, ethos and values.



Why is a FNP required in a school?

1. Children eat at least one and up to three meals a day and spend up to 8 hours everyday at school.
2. Education and health have been shown to be intimately linked.
3. Hungry, malnourished children have a harder time focusing in classes. Poor nutrition, combined with a lack of physical activity, can affect a child's intellectual performance.
4. Children are under a lot of peer pressure at school and their eating habits are greatly influenced by opinions they form there.
5. Children are extensively exposed to various kinds of unhealthy food in their school canteens, mostly without supervision. Corporates producing food products target schools to promote their products through distribution of freebies and samples, contests, etc.

DEVELOPING THE FNP

No matter who takes the initiative in formulating the FNP, the process must involve parents, teachers, a student representative & nutritionists. It may involve the canteen manager, health officer and student alumni. Also formation of a Nutrition Task force is critical to ensure an accountable group leads the action.

FNP must definitely address

- Sale and promotion of junk food in school canteens
- Availability of nutritious food in the canteen
- Promotional and advertising campaigns of Corporates through distribution of freebies, free samples, etc.
- Sponsorship of events in school such as celebration of Independence day, Republic day, sports day, annual day, etc.
- Proper nutrition in school meals (for schools that provide mid day meals)
- Availability of clean & safe drinking water
- Infrastructure available to ensure healthy food such as clean kitchen

What schools can do...

- Form a Nutrition Task force to identify the specific problems with regard to food and nutrition affecting your school
- Draft a **Food and nutrition policy (FNP)**
- Ensure the FNP is implemented
- Conduct a canteen audit involving students on parameters of safety of food, quality of food served, extent of corporate influence, personal hygiene of canteen staff, etc. The students may evolve more parameters
- Insist that canteens display nutritive value of food they serve and classrooms have charts showing the same
- Discourage sale of junk food in the canteen, distribution of free samples of junk food and advertisements promoting unhealthy eating in the canteen and school premises
- Educate students about the adverse effects of eating excessive junk food and impact of hidden messages in promotions and marketing ploys
- Ensure that what is taught as part of the formal curriculum is implemented and there is consistency
- Conduct nutrition education programme in schools for not only students but also for teachers and parents

What the PTA/ parents can do...

- Organise yourselves into a PTA if the school does not have one. The PTA should involve itself in activities of the school, especially concerning food and nutrition of children
- As a collective, urge the school to frame and adopt a FNP, clearly laying guidelines for what should and should not be sold in the school canteen, or if the school should allow product promotion campaigns in the school, etc.
- A school canteen is not a corporate entity. It is a source of supplementary food for your child. Canteens must be made to conform to basic standards of nutrition and health
- By forming a PTA you can:
 - ◆ Ensure that all school meals are healthy
 - ◆ Ensure children are protected from marketing of unhealthy food and beverages at school
 - ◆ Ban the sale of unhealthy food and beverages from school vending machines

A Case Study...

During our study we found that PTA of a certain private school was extremely enthusiastic in the activities of the school and especially bringing about changes in the canteen which primarily sold food items such as chips, soft drinks, jelly, chewing gum, chocolates etc.

Initially there was resistance from the canteen incharge to stop sale of such food items. But with persistent effort of the influential PTA and after successfully managing the canteen for a week the PTA proved to the school management that it was profitable to sell items such as sandwich, salads etc, made at the canteen.

After a campaign of nearly 5 months the canteen has successfully stopped sale of chips, puffed corn, chocolates and biscuits and till date remains a canteen that does not sell junk food.



As an individual you can

- Promote good and healthy eating habits at home
- Help children understand advertisements and their influence on the mind
- Monitor the child's eating habits at home and in school. Do not encourage regular consumption of junk food at home, or in school

Role of community groups and welfare organisations

Community groups and welfare organisations are an integral part of the society

- Lobby with school managements to phase out sale of junk food in canteens and urge schools to take immediate action
 - ◆ Write to schools that sell junk food, remind them they have a responsibility towards health of their students
 - ◆ Meet with the PTA of the schools, sensitise them on the issue and work with the PTA to urge the school to take immediate action
- Campaign for improving nutrition of children in schools through awareness programmes such as public debates, educational exhibitions etc.
 - ◆ Work with schools in conducting nutrition education for students as well as parents
 - ◆ Provide assistance to schools in drafting the FNP
 - ◆ Assist the Nutrition Task Force in the implementation of the policy and the monitoring of its implementation
- Documentation of model school canteens and give publicity



Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG) is a non-profit, non-political and professional organisation that works towards protecting citizen's rights in consumer and environmental issues and promoting good governance processes including transparency, accountability and participatory decision making.



Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG)

8, Fourth Street, Venkateswara Nagar

Adyar, Chennai 600 020, India

Tel : +91-44-2446 0387 • Fax : +91-44-2491 4358

E-mail : cag@xlweb.com • Website : www.cag.org.in

