

Curriculum Calls for More Milk

For the past couple of years, milk vending has been a hot-button issue for nutritionists, schools, doctors and parents alike.

The battle isn't so much how schools can provide milk to their students, but more so how can they provide the right kind of milk to their students.

"The trend in beverages has been away from milk and toward sweetened drinks for the past four decades," says Robert Murray, director of the Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition, Nationwide Children's Hospital and professor of Pediatrics at Ohio State University's School of Medicine. "This has had a significant negative effect on child nutrition and has contributed to higher intakes of daily calories for many children."

To address concerns over school vending, Murray says the beverage industry continues to collaborate with health leaders to help establish new standards for schools.

"Recently, the federal government has begun considering legislation to set a national standard for school nutrition, covering foods and drinks sold outside the school meal programs," he notes. "Such standards would allow [the] industry to respond with innovations that apply nationwide, replacing the patchwork of state laws and regulations that currently govern school nutrition."

To piggyback on this trend, Murray adds, dairy processors have created more eye-catching, attractive-looking packaging.

"Dairy packaging has become more aligned with consumer needs," he notes. "Hand-held reclosable bottles, single-serving string cheese and yogurt in child-friendly tubes are examples of products that can be used on the go. More colorful dairy vending machines have helped peak interest."

Over the past five years, for instance, the dairy industry has aimed to increase the distribution of single-serve, round plastic resealable milk packaging in schools, says Jim Montel, executive vice president of strategic initiatives for Dairy Management Inc., which manages the national dairy producer checkoff program.

"So far, we have achieved a 10% school conversion from cardboard cartons to plastic bottles, despite significant economic barriers," he says. "To help increase the availability of milk in round resealable bottles, DMI is partnering with a major packaging company and U.S. milk processors to conduct tests from a production capability and pricing economics standpoint to overcome these barriers and meet demand."

To protect milk's place in schools, DMI – in partnership with the National Football League – has launched the "Fuel Up To Play 60" program, which encourages public officials to address children's health and wellness through good nutrition, Montel says. In fact, by the end of the 2009-10 school year, this program is expected to be in 60,000 schools nationwide, reaching more than 35 million students (read more about "Fuel Up To Play 60" in this month's Newsline).

"To proactively approach the demand by some consumers for sustainable products, the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy is complet-

ing the first comprehensive life cycle assessment of fluid milk, which will be published in 2010," Montel says. "The LCA will provide the industry with a scientific baseline of our carbon footprint so we can continue to improve the business value of our industry, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and provide products that are healthy for people and the planet."

Additionally, the possible change in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines may urge parents to become more and more of a milk advocate.

"The 2010 Dietary Guidelines will likely continue to underline the importance of naturally nutrient-rich foods like milk, as will discussions this year involving meals in schools," says Vivien Godfrey, chief executive officer for Milk Processor Education Program (MilkPEP), Washington, D.C. "Naturally nutrient-rich is a sweet spot for milk, and MilkPEP will continue to do all we can to help milk companies leverage these trends."

Another significant area, Godfrey says, is flavored milk. MilkPEP's "Refuel with Chocolate Milk" campaign successfully demonstrates the positioning of chocolate milk as an exciting drink that replenishes your body after exercise, she says.

"We believe that flavored milk may also benefit from tough economic times and can be seen as an affordable treat when more expensive treats may be out of reach for some families," Godfrey says.

But one of the main challenges milk advocates face is how the school lunch program may alter its requirements on what types of milk will be served in schools, says Jerry Kozak, president and CEO of National Milk Producers Federation, Arlington, Va.

A significant growth area for dairy processors, chocolate milk has recently come under fire by nutritionists, some of whom have branded it as bad as carbonated soft drinks because of its sugar content. Left out of the equation are the many nutrients milk contains that pop lacks, suggesting that a spoonful of sugar is trivial if it helps the medicine go down.

"There is pressure to reduce the calorie count of the milk offered by schools, either through reductions in the fat or carbohydrate content of the products," Kozak says. "We will have to be diligent in reminding decision-makers in Washington that milk has a uniquely valuable role in delivering nutrition to children, and we have to be careful that any new regulations don't throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater in an effort to slash caloric intakes."

According to the Special Milk Program summary conducted by the Food & Nutrition Service, school milk programs have dropped to 5,600 as of Jan. 8, from a whopping 98,400 in 1969. Meanwhile, federal expenditures topped at \$150 million in 1977 but have since been reduced to \$14 million in 2009. ■

