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Reduced-sugar formulations of flavored milk enter schools

By Rena Archwamety

MADISON, Wis. — Focus on improving nutrition and curbing childhood obesity has prompted many school districts across the United States to revamp their food offerings, and in many schools, chocolate and other flavored milks have landed on the chopping block.

Earlier this month, the Massachusetts Public Health Council approved new school nutrition standards that include the elimination of sugary beverages. The new regulations will go into effect August 2012, and after August 2013, no flavored milk that contains more sugar than plain lowfat or nonfat milk will be allowed.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health says the goal of these regulations is to ensure that public schools offer students food and beverage choices that enhance learning, contribute to healthy growth and development and cultivate lifelong healthy eating behaviors.

"This has to be a priority for the Commonwealth, because one-third of Massachusetts children are obese or overweight," the department adds. "This puts them on a trajectory for numerous chronic conditions in adulthood that we know are preventable, including diabetes and heart disease."

Last month, the Los Angeles Board of Education voted 5-2 to stop buying chocolate- and strawberry-flavored milk in its 2011-2012 school year dairy contract. As a result, flavored milk no longer will be offered in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) when the schools open in August and September.

"Encouraging healthy choices will lead to healthier students," says LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy. "Eliminating chocolate milk and strawberry milk is good for all youngsters, and is especially beneficial during an era of rampant childhood obesity."

Other California school districts, including Berkeley, Compton and San Diego, already have enacted flavored milk bans, as have schools in Minneapolis and Washington D.C.

Many in the dairy industry have anticipated this trend and the need to address sugar and calories in flavored milk. In 2006, Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), in collaboration with the Milk Processors Education Program (MilkPEP), brought together industry members

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including farmers, processors, ingredient manufacturers and researchers to proactively reformulate flavored milks. According to Carol Blindauer, registered dietitian and senior vice president, health and wellness, Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, this cross-industry collaboration has resulted in significant changes, including:

- Average added sugar has been reduced from 16.7 grams (4 teaspoons) down to 11.8 grams (2.8 teaspoons) per 8 ounces — a 30-percent reduction since 2006;
- More than 75 percent of flavored milk served in schools now is 150 calories or less;
- The average calorie level of flavored milk is 143, an approximately 50-calorie difference from white milk; and
- The majority of milk in schools is lowfat or fat-free.

Dean Foods has worked the last few years to reformulate its flavored milks, and earlier this month the company showcased its TruMoo milks with reduced sugar and fewer calories at the School Nutrition Association annual conference in Nashville, Tenn. The new flavored milks contain 10-15 percent fewer calories and 15-20 percent less sugar than previous flavored milks, as well as no high fructose corn syrup.

Dean Foods spokesperson Jamais Schuler says the reception at the conference was very strong, with many people commenting that the flavored milk tasted great and that they couldn't tell that it was fat-free.

"We have worked really hard on this formula and testing various formulas," Schuler says, adding that Dean Foods started working on the new flavored

milk formulation in 2008. "A lot of art and science goes into the right mix of fresh local milk, cocoa and sugar. In taste testing, (TruMoo) not only beat out the competition, but also our own dairy brands and our own chocolate milk formulas."

TruMoo wasn't a direct response to flavored milk bans in schools or any specific movement, Schuler says. Rather, it was developed out of a general trend the company saw about three years ago when it realized it needed to develop a product with less sugar and had been hearing from customers who wanted less high fructose corn syrup. Dean Foods launched the new formula's first pilot with its Garelick Farms brand on the East Coast in 2009, and it has since been sampling the product in schools and retailers across the country. The Wendy's chain now is carrying TruMoo in its restaurants, and several districts have committed to serving TruMoo when the school year begins.

The city of Burlington, Vt., public schools, located in TruMoo's pilot region of New England, served the new milk through the entire 2010-2011 school year. Doug Davis, director of foodservice for Burlington public schools and president-elect of the School Nutrition Association of Vermont, has been pleased with the results.

"The bottom line for us was that it tastes great, the kids love it, and we're able to provide more nutritional balance on our cafeteria trays with TruMoo," Davis says. "It's been a real win-win for Burlington schools."

Not all bids are done yet, but Schuler says he can't think of any school that has declined TruMoo because of the new formula. More than 70 percent of Dean Foods' schools so far have taken the new formula.

One district, Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, even reversed a chocolate milk ban to partner with Dean Foods' Shenandoah's Pride brand, which offered pilot-stage flavored milks that mirrored the TruMoo formula. This pilot formula will be converted to the TruMoo branding in August.

"This is one specific example, and we hope more and more schools and parents become educated on the data and find out how many nutrients they missed when flavored milk was banned," Schuler says. "It's a potential solution for schools that want to bring it back to the cafeteria."

The dairy industry continues to fund product research aimed at continued innovations and improvement of flavored milk. Education efforts also continue. The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy has established an industry-wide plan with the MilkPEP, the International Dairy Foods Association, the National Milk Producers Federation and state and regional dairy associations to educate people on the importance of milk and flavored milk in children's diets and to help keep flavored milk as a choice for school meals.

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This group has developed a blueprint outlining strategies to address flavored milk which resulted in workshops, webinars and toolkits to help industry members address local market situations. It also provides counsel to help address decisions to remove flavored milk.

“When flavored milk leaves the lunchroom, its nine essential nutrients leave with it,” Blindauer says. “Research revealed that eliminating flavored milk from elementary schools resulted in a dramatic drop in school milk consumption — 35 percent.”

Education and guidance is available to inform schools on flavored milks nutrition, Blindauer adds. The U.S. Dairy Innovation Center, she says, will continue to work with schools that have removed flavored milk in anticipation of similar results seen among other districts that removed flavored milk. **CMN**