



Flavored milk a popular target—reformulating to meet the challenge

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In the past year chocolate milk has been in the spotlight in many school districts throughout the country. It's become a popular target in the fight against childhood obesity, with some people pointing fingers at flavored milk's added sugar as harmful.

Ann Ocaña, a consultant with the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, spoke on the topic of keeping flavored milk in schools at the Dairy Business Association's (DBA) annual conference, earlier this winter.

Ocaña said flavored milk is being used as a quick fix to a larger problem on school menus, as an easy way to reduce calories. But in areas where flavored milk was removed from the menu and only white milk was provided, 35 percent less milk was consumed—having a significant and unintended impact on nutrition.

"When flavored milk is removed from the lunchroom, students lose its nine essential nutrients, because milk consumption often drops," she pointed out.

Although the issue of flavored milk in schools has made headlines, the reality is the vast majority of school districts continue to offer it to students. But, Ocaña said, it comes as an important reminder that there's a perpetual need for education on milk, including flavored milk's role in a healthy, well-balanced diet. There's also a need to be proactive to protect milk and flavored milk in schools, where the nine essential nutrients milk provides support children's growth and development.

"Milk drinkers (white or flavored) have better quality diets," she shared. "Milk (including flavored milk) is a cost-effective source of three out of four nutrients of concern—calcium, potassium and vitamin D—kids need for healthy diets."

To address the concern over added sugars in flavored milk there's been an industry-wide movement to reformulate flavored milk to reduce the amount of sugar they contain, with about 66 percent or two-thirds of processors reformulating their flavored milk already. According to a fact sheet provided by the Center for U.S. Dairy, the amount of sugar in flavored milk has been reduced by 38 percent, from 16.7 grams to 10.4 grams, from five years ago to today's levels. On average, flavored milk contains 134 calories per serving—only 31 more calories than white milk in schools. There's an industry commitment for all school milk to have 150 calories or less per 8-ounce serving. Fat free chocolate milk with 130 calories and 10 grams of added sugar per serving is available to schools.

Nationally, according to Ocaña, about 45 percent of moms are aware of the flavored milk debate in schools, but only 20 percent support removing it from the menu. Signs to watch for that might trigger the issue on a local level include:

- Activists speaking out on school meals;

- New decision makers in place;
- High profile personalities gaining local traction;
- Increased local news stories on school meals, sugar, etc.;
- Changes in current school nutrition guidelines.

By collaborating with school nutrition directors and decision makers there's opportunity to reach a solution through educating on milk's nutrient package of nine essential nutrients and other scientifically-proven advantages vs. nutritionally bereft sugary beverages, as well as elevating the conversation to balanced meals and physical activity.

"At the end of the day, this is a grassroots issue. It's important for dairy producers to keep an eye on what is going on in their local schools and then report back to their local promotion agencies (i.e., Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board or Midwest Dairy Association) in order to obtain tools and resources to talk with the school community about the important role of milk and flavored milk," Ocaña said.

For more information, including toolkits for navigating the flavored milk challenge in your area, go to: www.usdairy.com/AboutUs/.InternationalDairyShow/Pages/HowtoKeeptheFlavoredMilkChoiceinYourSchools.aspx.

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