Kids give chocolate milk a pass

By Anna B. Mitchell
Staff Writer

Most children at Jesse Boyd Elementary School in Spartanburg were drinking low-fat milk with their lunches when researchers arrived in early October to study their eating habits.

Problem was, 85 percent of the milk cartons were loaded with sugar. Chocolate, strawberry and vanilla-flavored milk was the most popular choice among Boyd students, as they are nationwide.

Wofford's Dave Pittman and USC Upstate's Jennifer Parker studied the eating habits of children at the school this fall with the theory that children's behavior can be changed long term if they see the long-term impact of diet and if they are rewarded immediately for healthy choices.

Preliminary results in this past week, Pittman said, have made him optimistic — especially among young children. He and Parker teamed up for the Boyd project after meeting through Spartanburg County's Childhood Obesity Task Force. Statewide, about a third of children are overweight.

"I'm interested in how dietary fat creates taste sensations and how that drives our desire to consume fat," said Pittman, whose training and research is in neuroscience.

"Along with that I have a concern with the obesity epidemic."

The professors brought in a team of college students to observe children in the cafeteria and return to educate kids about their food. If they chose a well-balanced, nutritious meal, washed down with 2 percent fat white milk, they received a sticker and rang a bell in the cafeteria.

Boyd Principal Bob Grant said little children crave recognition from teachers and classmates and the older children were shocked by how much sugar they'd been eating. The renewed focus on healthier kids — who learn more and misbehave less at school — has been expanded at Boyd to include a fitness club in the mornings, he said.

"That bell is still ringing everyday," he said.

Some school districts across the U.S. have opted to take chocolate milk out of cafeterias, which prompted the National Dairy Council (the same folks who brought us "Got milk?") in recent weeks to launch a $1 million ad campaign — "Raise Your Hand for Chocolate Milk!" The campaign premise is milk consumption of any kind, and the calcium it gives kids, is better than alternatives such as sodas or fruit juices.

"Fear of losing money, I'm sure, is what's driving that," Pittman said. "But if you are given a choice between white and chocolate milk, what will you choose as a kindergarten? You could take a multivitamin and drink a coke. You'll get the same amount of sugar and nutrition as in chocolate milk."

This past week, Pittman and his team returned to Boyd to see if their efforts had made a difference a month after schooling children on healthy habits.

"It's too soon to tell, but it was very clear they haven't reverted back to drinking more chocolate than white milk," Pittman said. "White milk consumption was way up."

When his team first arrived to Boyd, chocolate milk was chosen 70 percent of the time, followed by white at 15 percent. The rest was strawberry and vanilla. No sodas are offered at the school, which also provides fruit juice and a water fountain for kids who are lactose intolerant.

Drink flavored milk every day at school, held told students, and sugar consumption by the end of the year will have been five to eight pounds. Pittman demonstrated his point by showing them what five pounds of sugar looks like — for many of them, 10 to 15 percent of their body weight. "And we wonder why 34 percent of our children are overweight," he said.

Shortly after the demonstration, 80 percent of kids were choosing the white milk — a complete turnaround.

"And chocolate was still an option," Pittman said. "Our results showed you don't have to take away the chocolate milk."

Pittman said he hopes to take the Boyd Elementary program and spread it to other schools in Spartanburg County and across the state. He also intends to return to Boyd each fall to see how the youngest children — most influenced by his work — change the eating culture at the school long term.

To learn more about it and to view the most up-to-date results of his work, visit www.balancedchoices.info.

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