

Mothers start a food fight

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Susan Rubin sounds passionate and angry as she describes the junk-food free-for-alls she has seen at schools across the nation.

Students are often surrounded by foods that "are loaded with so many artificial ingredients and additives that you need a Ph.D. in biochemistry to figure out what's in them," says Rubin, a mother from Chappaqua, N.Y., with three school-age daughters.

"Real food doesn't come from a science lab. It grows in the ground, flies in the air, swims in the sea and walks on the ground," says Rubin, 47, one of the stars of *Two Angry Moms*, a new documentary film about a parental war against the sale of highly processed, sugary foods in U.S. schools.

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The other angry mom is the film's producer, Amy Kalafa, 48, of Weston, Conn., a veteran independent filmmaker who has two daughters. She was inspired by a state agricultural official who once said that it would take 2 million angry moms to change school food in the USA. The women are fighting to remove foods such as chicken nuggets, french fries, cookies, candy, chips, doughnuts, snack cakes and sugary drinks from school vending machines and cafeterias.

The goal? To replace those foods with healthier offerings, such as fresh fruit and vegetables.

The film, which cost roughly \$500,000 to make, was financed by Kalafa and her husband, Alexander Gunuey, along with some small grants and donations of \$5 to \$1,000 from hundreds of concerned parents.

People can buy 10 DVDs and a special information kit for \$275, then host screenings in September at homes, school auditoriums and community theaters. In the fall, single DVDs will be available for \$25. (See www.angrymoms.org.)

"The documentary is mostly inspirational, a how-to for anybody who watches it," Kalafa says.

"She's the filmmaker; I'm the troublemaker," says Rubin, a dentist-turned-nutritionist who is the founder of the advocacy group Better School Food.

Rubin started on her campaign about 12 years ago when her oldest daughter, then in first grade, came home with candy wrappers in her backpack. "I was a dentist at the time, and I wondered what was going on. I was worried about cavities. It was before obesity hit the radar screen."

Kalafa was looking for a parent to feature in her film. "I met so many parents who got stuck, but Susan had stepped out of her local school district and created a national group. We met, we hit it off, and I said, 'OK, I'm going to follow you for a year. Let's see what happens.'"

The documentary is already drawing fire from food service directors who say many schools are succeeding in serving nutritious, tasty meals.

"What we are offering is much better than what is represented in the film," says Sharlene Wong, director of food service for the Wallingford (Conn.) Public Schools. She saw a preview of the documentary and

has traveled around the country examining lunch programs.

In defense of schools

Wong says many districts have already made improvements. "Our cooking methods have changed. We don't fry chicken nuggets, we bake them. And if they are breaded, we use whole-wheat flour. We have eliminated french fries and added baked sweet-potato wedges.

"We only offer whole-grain breads. Our pizzas are made with whole-grain crust and low-fat, low-sodium cheese."

Kalafa and Rubin want districts to use more fresh, locally grown produce and offer gardens and cooking classes so kids can get involved.

Schools have been promoting local farm products for years, Wong says. "There are thousands of districts that participate in farm-to-school programs. We take any opportunity to use the farm-fresh products like corn, pears, plums, apples, broccoli and squash."

Mary Hill, president of the School Nutrition Association, a professional group with 54,000 members, including food service directors, cooks and cafeteria managers, says the majority of districts are trying to offer more nutritious foods. "We all want our children to eat healthier, and we're going to do whatever it takes within our resources to make that possible."

A federal law requires that school districts have their own wellness policies, including guidelines for foods sold in schools. Some states regulate foods sold in vending machines, school stores and a la carte lines. There's also a bill before Congress that would require an updating of standards for these foods.

The heart of everyone's concern is childhood obesity. A third of children — about 25 million kids — are overweight or obese, which puts them at risk for developing type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and other health problems.

Kalafa says she applauds improvements but adds that from what she has seen, "schools are still offering highly processed foods. I have not seen a lot of schools baking chicken from scratch."

She suggests that parents have lunch at school and investigate what's being offered throughout the building. If it's not healthful, the adults should form a committee and take action, she says.

"I have letters from thousands of parents from every state talking about the nutrition horrors they've seen in their kids' schools, from preschool on up," Kalafa says.

"I'm not just talking about the school lunch program, but the entire culture of food in schools, which is reflective of the entire culture of food in America: the availability of lots of processed food that fills you up but doesn't contribute to optimum learning and behavior.

"We're trying to show people the many wonderful things that can be done when parents get involved."

In the movie, she profiles a few model programs, including the one at the Katonah-Lewisboro School District in Katonah, N.Y. Last year, the district started offering more nutritious foods in the vending machines and hired a chef trained at the Culinary Institute of America to help instruct the cafeteria staff on preparing healthier fare.

At first, the students grumbled about not having french fries and chocolate-chip cookies, says Fran Cortina, food service director for the district. She's an employee of ARAMARK, the food service provider.

"Honestly, they don't even miss it anymore."

Even some parents asked, "Didn't you go a little crazy by taking out the white bread?" says Mary Ann Petrilena, one of the moms who helped spearhead the change. But "these changes will profoundly impact children's long-term health," she says.

The district offers a farmers' market on Saturday at the high school and has gardens at two schools. Rubin wishes all schools had a garden.

"It's a way to inspire students to care about the food," she says. "It's so different when you are growing the food. If peas are put in front of you, and you are told they are good for you, that doesn't mean anything. If you grow that pea and watch it flower, it'll mean a lot more to you. That's such a powerful teaching tool."

Proud to be angry

Some people say all these changes are too expensive, "but I think every penny is worth it," Rubin says. "To me, food is health care. You can pay the farmer or the doctor."

Rubin knows the term "angry mom" turns off some people, but it shouldn't, she says. "I'm proud to be an angry mom. Angry mom means a mom who cares enough to stand up for her child's health.

"You get angry when your boundary has been violated, and the food industry has violated our boundaries with what they are offering our kids. I'm just trying to protect my cubs." She hopes the film makes "the term 'angry mom' as common as soccer mom."

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