Rich foods a big threat to poor kids

CESAR CHAVEZ SCHOOL IS FIGHTING OBESITY; MAYBE OPRAH CAN HELP

By Joe Rodriguez

At Cesar Chavez Elementary School in San Jose's Mayfair neighborhood, the children have lunch in 25-minute shifts because the cafeteria is too small. The vice principal strains her voice to quiet the kids and move them along. But overcrowding isn't the biggest problem in the cafeteria: Childhood obesity is.

At age 9 and a weighty 135 pounds, Rocio took a seat next to her fellow students. The menu that day was a lean ham sandwich, "lite" yogurt, low-fat milk, peaches and a cookie. The boy next to Rocio thought it "was great," but she winced.

"I like mine better."

She had an even leaner lunch, a low-fat turkey and ham sandwich prepared by her mother, Rosalva Ramos, who was standing nearby.

"If I don't bring her lunch," Ramos said in Spanish, "she'll eat too much after school and at night."

Several months ago, an anti-poverty organization canvassed the neighborhood for health problems and discovered an alarming number of overweight children.

"Childhood obesity is the No. 1 health problem in the neighborhood, which means it's the No. 1 health problem at my school," said Chavez principal Irma Balderas. "Unhealthy students have a harder time learning."

Some convincing studies back her up. Shaping America's Youth, a national advocacy group, reported recently that 15 percent of American children are already overweight, and another 15 percent are on the brink. That means they're good candidates for developing heart trouble, diabetes and depression long before they take the SAT exam.

Closer to home, the Packard Foundation has discovered that the health of immigrant children gets worse the longer they live in the United States. That's what happens when so few have health insurance, when so many eat McFat food, watch too much TV and don't have the same recreational opportunities as richer kids.

Some experts believe exercise is the best cure for obesity. When the Mercury News recently interviewed Mary Blackman, past president of the California Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance about the problem, she said the poor have less opportunity for fitness.

"Many poor parents can't afford the participation fees, uniforms and transportation costs of organized sports. And their neighborhoods aren't safe for playing outside."

When the Mayfair Improvement Initiative invited pediatricians from Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, parents said they wanted the school to be the center of an anti-obesity project. Led by Dr. Anisha Patel, the project improved the school menus, offers healthy diet clinics for parents and is trying to build a soccer field on campus.

Rosalva Ramos represents the challenge.

After her husband's doctors told him he'd die soon if he didn't reduce his cholesterol level, he started exercising regularly. But Rosalva and Rocio don't end and remain overweight.

"I know I should be doing better, but I'm preoccupied about my mother in Mexico, who is very ill."

How about youth soccer or Mexican dance for the girls?
"We'd like to, but you need a car to get them there," Ramos said. "I don't drive and my husband works so late and on weekends, he isn't around to take them."

She's right about the transportation thing. Being a soccer mom without a minivan is hard enough. Try being one without a car or driver's license.

That's why principal Balderas plans to ask Oprah Winfrey for $250,000.

It'll cost about that much to repair the school's gopher-holed, weedy, ankle-twisting playing field. When a principal operates in a poor school district that's slaughtered recreation to improve test scores, she does anything she can to get her students to shed pounds. Meanwhile, she's organizing hula and salsa dancing lessons for the students inside the cafeteria.

When childhood obesity is an epidemic, there's no time to waste.

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