

Attention, Wal-Mart Shoppers: Healthy Snacks in Aisles #7 and #21
A Case Study of the Shasta HEAC Initiative
Written by Berkeley Media Studies Group

Middle-schoolers in the Northern California town of Anderson were fed up with the amount of junk food in the check-out stands of their local grocery stores, mini-mart and gas stations. They knew that the placement and heavy promotion of these products encouraged their peers to eat unhealthily. They decided to approach the management of area stores to outline their solution: Check-out stands offering healthier foods such as fruit and granola bars.

Thanks to months of working with The California Endowment's Healthy Eating, Active Communities (HEAC) initiative staff, the students were savvy about the effect of these products on their bodies and minds, such as increased risk for diabetes and decreased concentration at school after eating junk food. HEAC staff helped the youth learn about acceptable levels of fat, sugar, and sodium content, appropriate portion sizes, and how to read product labels for nutritional content, so they knew precisely what they meant when they demanded "healthier" choices.

The first store manager who agreed to meet with the students was Tim Trimble, the manager of the Anderson Wal-Mart. He was impressed with their passion and knowledge, and receptive to their request. However, Trimble explained that due to long-term contracts with a few manufacturers, Wal-Mart could not offer an entirely junk food-free check-out stand. But Trimble said he could pilot a check-out stand that included less junk food and more healthy options.

Trimble had three conditions the students had to meet if the Anderson store was to incorporate the "healthy options" check stands. First, in order to ensure that the community supported the proposed change, he asked the students to distribute surveys and obtain approval from ten percent of the 35,000 weekly customers shopping at Wal-Mart. Second, the students would have to be sure the healthy foods could be displayed in a way that met Wal-Mart's specific display standards. Finally, the healthier options would have to show increased sales.

"It sounded like a lot, but the students were determined and convinced that they had community support," said Sheryl Brophy Vietti, a community development coordinator for Shasta County Public Health.

Undeterred, the youth gathered the required feedback from shoppers—including whopping 600 surveys in one day—which overwhelmingly favored the proposed stands. They also took on the complicated task of designing a new check-out stand that met Wal-Mart's specifications.

When the Anderson Wal-Mart unveiled two pilot check-out stands in the spring of 2007, they were an immediate success. Sales doubled. Wal-Mart staff found it impossible to keep the healthy options stocked, frequently selling out of them within two hours. The healthier snacks created such a demand that they drew the attention of media and of neighboring Wal-Mart managers, including one as far away as Indiana, who plans to implement the change in his Fort Wayne store.

Trimble has reported on the achievement at Wal-Mart district meetings, and plans to present it at a regional meeting with managers throughout California. Anderson youth and public health advocates are hopeful that their proposal will have a local ripple effect, and plan to work with other local stores to follow Wal-Mart's example. They also hope for a giant ripple effect, where Wal-Mart would offer the healthier options at stands in stores throughout California, and then nationwide, perhaps even influencing Wal-Mart's competitors to make healthy changes.

Many challenges remain, including Wal-Mart's multi-year contracts with junk food companies that require product placement in the check-out stands. Moreover, candy and gum suppliers may prove to be vocal opponents if they see their sales drop in the check-out stands hosting the healthy options, or if stores agree to stands with *only* healthy options. In Anderson, young people inspired by HEAC are hoping a business policy shift in one store serving one community will one day have an even greater impact on the health of Wal-Mart shoppers throughout the country.

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For online news articles about the youths' work with the Anderson Wal-Mart, please visit the following links:

<http://andersonvalleypost.com/news/2007/mar/14/checking-out-health/>

<http://www.andersonvalleypost.com/news/2007/apr/04/students-survey-healthy-snack-appeal-wal-mart/>

<http://www.andersonvalleypost.com/news/2007/apr/11/middle-school-students-unveil-snack-options/>

<http://redding.com/news/2007/jun/09/pupils-seek-healthier-food/>

<http://www.andersonvalleypost.com/news/2007/jun/13/kids-group-asks-granolawal-mart-lets-them-have-it/>