

Local schools enact peanut ban

By David Lias

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A traditional staple of school sack lunches – a peanut butter and jelly sandwich – will no longer be allowed at Austin and Jolley elementary schools under a new allergen policy recently approved by the Vermillion School Board.

The school board, after accepting several months worth of conversation, study and input from a citizens' committee, has crafted and approved the policy with the goal of minimizing health risks and providing a safe educational environment for all students.

"We know that peanut allergies and nut allergies are potentially life threatening," said Kim Johnson, Austin School administrator, who helped organize the committee and the study that lead to this formation of the policy. "We wanted to be sure that we were doing everything possible to keep our students safe."

She noted that from 1997 through 2008, the number of children with peanut allergies has tripled in the United States.

Under this new policy, Austin and Jolley schools will be declared nut/peanut safe, and nut

products will not be allowed in either building. As a proactive practice to prevent exposure to allergens or infectious disease, only prepackaged items with ingredient labels will be allowed for classroom snacks.

If a student brings nut/peanut products in a home lunch, the lunch will be taken. A teacher or staff member will explain why the lunch was taken, and an alternative lunch will be provided. School staff will also call the parents that day, explaining the incident. The foods the child brought that contained nut products will be identified so future problems can be avoided and the parent will be informed to pick up the lunch.

Johnson said signs will be placed near every entrance of the two schools stating that they are "nut safe" facilities. A dialogue will also be held with the community and especially parents of students attending the schools explaining that no peanut products are allowed in the two buildings.

The policy calls for offering education and awareness training to students, parents and community groups concerning the policy's guidelines. Plans shall be put into place for

responding in a timely manner to emergency situations involving students with food allergies.

School Board member Dave Stammer, noting the difficulty of keeping all peanut products out of a school setting, asked if designating the two schools as "nut safe" may give a false sense of security.

"We talked about that a lot," said Chris Esping, president of the school board who also served on the committee that helped craft the policy. "Ideally, we would want to be peanut free, but we also said there is no way that we can guarantee that. They (the school staff) are going to police it as best as they can, but there could be a child that brings a peanut butter sandwich to school."

Stammer also noted that typical fundraisers sponsored by student or children's groups often feature the selling of candy bars and other food products that could contain nut products.

"Would those be allowed ... if it's not to be

consumed on school property, if it's still wrapped in its package, would it still be allowed in the school?" Stammer asked. "I want it (the policy) to be safe, but at the same time, I don't want it to change everything that we do and think."

Johnson admitted that the scenario Stammer introduced would need further scrutiny.

School board member Shannon Fairholm noted that steps are already being taken, including the following of certain protocols, to try to eliminate allergen problems at Austin Elementary.

"Why do you feel that that is not currently working?" she asked Johnson.

"Currently, it is working, in that we haven't had any exposure or allergic reactions," Johnson replied, "but there still is that risk of cross contamination."

Special cleaning protocols are followed to treat school lunch tables where a student may have dined on foods containing nut products.

"However, say for example a child who had a peanut butter sandwich for lunch goes to the computer lab and is on the keyboard and leaves residue on a keyboard," Johnson said. "That lab is busy all day long, and a child will likely visit it that is allergic and that residual exposure can be enough to cause a reaction."

The goal of the committee initially was to limit the scope of the policy to the district's youngest students, who attend Austin Elementary.

"However, in the last meeting, the committee's perspective changed on that," Johnson said.

"The hard part was trying to determine where that age happens where kids become responsible," said Matthew Krell, MD, a pediatrician with the Vermillion Medical Clinic who also serves on the allergen study committee.

"A fifth-grader is probably old enough to identify that he or she has this allergy, but where is the second-grader who just gets sent to Jolley?"

Kids of that age, Krell

said, likely may not fully be aware of all foods that may contain nut products. "That where was some of the determination came in to involve both elementary schools," he said.

School staff will provide approved snack lists to parents, and only approved snacks will be allowed in classrooms. The policy suggests that families provide a non-food item for the classroom for student birthday celebrations rather than treats.

Krell noted that the committee decided it was more realistic to designate Austin and Jolley schools as "peanut safe" rather than "peanut free" after studying allergen policies in other school districts.

"There's going to be times when peanuts get in," he said. "In the best case scenario, where you are watching everybody, there are going to be times where it gets in. The idea is try to create an environment for those kids who are most at risk in which we're decreasing that risk."

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