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Eliminating ‘candy bribery’ in schools
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Samara Williams’ candy epiphany came on the morning she saw the dental van parked in front of Rose Hill Elementary, and the volunteers preparing to provide free teeth cleanings for second graders.

Rose Hill Elementary kindergartener Aaliyah Lovelace chooses a reward from among pencils, temporary tattoos and other non-food treasures offered by principal Samara Williams.

Rose Hill, in Commerce City, serves some of the poorest kids in the metro area and dental care is a precious commodity that many of their parents simply can’t afford.

Suddenly, it all clicked for Williams, the school principal. Why, she wondered, would the school arrange to clean the kids’ teeth in the morning and then pass out candy in the afternoon? “It’s just not right,” said Williams. “It really is an ethical and a moral thing.”

Teachers have long used candy the way dog trainers use Liver Snaps. It’s motivation. A Jolly Rancher can buy a few minutes of silence, or reward a right answer to a math problem. A Tootsie Roll tells a kid “Great job!” A pack of Skittles says “Thanks for doing your best on this test.” And the promise of a Snickers can still rambunctious youngsters who need to settle down.

Candy: cheap, easy and effective
Candy is cheap, it’s readily available, and it’s one of the most effective child behavior modification tools in an adult’s arsenal. It’s time-tested. And that’s why candy trafficking in the classroom is so widespread. Some would say pernicious. It’s everywhere, and who but the crankiest fussbudget would object to some sweet bite-sized rewards? It’s not like teachers are handing out triple-scoop ice cream cones. But increasing numbers of educators – and vast numbers of parents – don’t see it that way anymore. As schools across the nation have banned sugar-sweetened sodas and chocolate milk, gotten rid of vending machines and upgraded school lunches to be healthier and more nutritious, candy in the classroom is also getting a critical evaluation.

At Rose Hill, where Williams had steadily been promoting a schoolwide wellness initiative, she’d been asking teachers for two years to stop giving out candy. Finally, in December, she issued an ultimatum.

“Those of you with a stash of candy, give it out during Christmas, give it to your own kids, but we are NOT giving our kids candy any more,’ ” she said. “If I’d said this on the first day I got there, nobody would have listened to me, and I would have gotten a lot of pushback. But because this was gradual, because we’d been moving in this direction for five years, I didn’t.”

Going through a Costco-sized bag every month
Sigrid Bowen, a first-grade teacher at Rose Hill, initially was skeptical. She’s been teaching for 16 years. “And we’ve always used candy,” she said. Typically, she’d go through a large Costco-sized bag of candy every month. “It was something that was second nature. I remember wondering what we could give in place of it.”

Now, Rose Hill students vie for Positive Action Tickets, which they can exchange for non-food goodies such as temporary tattoos, pencils, calendars, ink stamps, books and other childish treasures. Bowen has also started rewarding her class with “two-minute dance parties.”
“It’s exercise and kids love it,” she said. “They love the other things too. It’s a great incentive for them.” Classroom parties, too, have changed. Parents who host the parties are asked to bring healthier items and skip the cupcakes and ice cream of years past.

**Kids as candy magnets**

Rainey Wikstrom, school wellness consultant for the Adams County District 14 schools, is tickled by what Rose Hill is doing. She wishes her own children, who go to school in Boulder County, had the same classroom candy restrictions.

“It happens in every school unless there’s a firm policy,” Wikstrom said. “The thing that’s so insidious, if you have six classes a day, and every teacher gives you a piece of candy, if you calculate the amount of sugar, it’s huge. It places a huge burden on kids – a health burden and a dental burden. It’s not the way we want to motivate kids.”

Her own children, she acknowledges, have always been candy magnets. “My daughter plays 15 minutes of a soccer game and comes home with 450 calories of cupcakes and juice drink a parent brought,” she said. “People assume it’s okay to feed kids anything at anytime, whether it’s a teacher, other parents or an elderly neighbor. It happens everywhere. It’s all with good intentions, but it’s having disastrous effects on children’s health.”

Julie Kerwin, the mother of a kindergartener and a second grader at Shelton Elementary in Golden, was astounded by the amount of candy her daughter got last year in first grade. “It was almost daily,” she said. “Every day they had a competition, boys versus girls, to see who had more good behavior points at the end of the day, and in first grade, the girls tend to win. So they would all get a piece of candy.” “I understand teachers have a classroom to control,” Kerwin said. “But as a parent, it was very annoying to me.”

**Classroom parties, fund-raisers also a challenge**

When Kerwin wound up on a school wellness committee, she pushed putting a stop to all food rewards. And for the most part, she thinks it’s worked. “I think maybe one or two teachers will give out candy, but most don’t,” she said.

Harder than ending candy rewards was getting parents to go along with the new classroom party policy: Now, at least 75 percent of the foods served in classroom parties at Shelton must be “healthy.” “And my idea of healthy includes pizza,” Kerwin said. “But we’re trying to put a stop to the cupcakes and ice cream. There’s been a lot more pushback about that.”

The PTA also had to rethink its fund-raising strategies. “When we had fund-raisers, the classroom that raised the most got a pizza party, and second place was an ice cream party,” Kerwin said. “That had to stop. So we decided to give out no rewards at all. And you know what? We raised the same amount of money.”