Fundraisers not so sweet
Federal snack guidelines impact school activities

By Cecilia Chan and Rusty Bradshaw

Since the beginning of the academic year Peoria Unified School District’s Oakwood Elementary School’s PTSO has seen its efforts hampered when it comes to selling treats to help fund classrooms.

That is when the Peoria Unified School District implemented the Smart Snacks Rule, federal guidelines spelling out nutritional contents and size of snacks and drinks sold on campus, such as in school stores, snack bars, vending machines and fundraisers. School districts in Arizona that participate in the National School Lunch Program are required to follow the rule or lose federal funding.

The program is also affecting parent support organizations in the Dysart Unified School District, although some groups went into the school year prepared.

"We’ve stayed away from those types (food) of fundraisers,” said Joanne Sandoval, Parkview Elementary School, 16066 N. Parkview Place, PTSA president. “We went to other types of fundraisers.”

However, other groups are feeling the crunch.

“I was at a PTSA president’s meeting last night (Jan. 28) and they (other leaders) were talking about it,” Ms. Sandoval said.

Independent reached out by email and telephone to PTSA groups from Kingswood, 15150 W. Mondell Road, and Marley Park, 15042 W. Sweetwater Ave., elementary schools, but none responded by press time.

Jim Dean, DUSD spokesman, said the federal guidelines are affecting other groups significantly. He added the district was following the federal guidelines, although some districts chose to not.

“Regarding support for (planned state) legislation, I can tell you that the current guidelines are incredibly restrictive,” Mr. Dean said. “Yes, we support the proposed legislation.”

Ms. Sandoval, who is in her first year as PTSA president, said in the past her school’s group sold pickles and Jamba Juice as fundraisers.

“If we do decide to do some kind of food fundraiser, we will look into low-sugar shaved ice, because we know that is acceptable,” she added.

For some parent support groups, the change has come slower.

“ We conduct many different fundraisers throughout the year, including snack sales,” PUSD’s Oakwood PTSO Vice President Darcie Brady said. “It was a Friday tradition to offer sno-cones after school. Teachers recruited parent volunteers to work the booth, and the money raised went to purchase items needed for that specific teacher’s class, such as consumables like glue sticks; hard goods like tables, shelves, bulletin boards, even class shirts for students that couldn’t afford one.”

But under the new guidelines out went the sno-cones, soda water, doughnuts and candies, such as Sour
Punch Straws and jelly beans. Instead, PUSD’s list of healthy choices for fundraisers include grapes or carrots in a bag, baked chips, ice cream cups and corn nuts snacks.

Ms. Brady said many of the school’s clubs use to sell candy, cupcakes and Gatorade after school to raise money.

“These groups have struggled to offset the money raised in snack sales with other items,” she said. “The problem with the ‘approved’ snacks is kids don’t want them, and I’m not convinced they are any healthier than the traditional snack. My kids’ pediatrician and dentist both say juice is high in sugar, can cause obesity and tooth decay, yet this is an approved alternative.”

Some schools, such as at Parkridge Elementary’s sixth-grade class in Peoria, the 6th-grade class is getting around the rule by selling Valentine lollipops with an order form sent home or available for pick up. The proceeds will go for the 6th grade’s Outdoor Ed. Scholarship Fund, according to the school’s Facebook page.

Help may be on the way.

District 21 Sen. Debbie Lesko, R-Peoria, is sponsoring a bill that would exempt groups that do fundraisers from adhering to the guidelines. She said she was prompted to action after she was approached by Ms. Brady.

“Prior to this year, the PTSO sold snocones after school on Fridays and cupcakes after school on Thursdays and made $7,000, which they then donated back to the school for their accelerated reader program,” Ms. Lesko said in an email. “The PTSO fundraiser is held after school hours and it should be up to the parent, not the federal government, if they want to give money to their child to purchase sno-cones or cupcakes after school.”

Senate Bill 1267 has been assigned to the Senate Health Committee, where most committee members have signed on as cosponsors, according to Ms. Lesko.

The bill proposes allowing school districts and charter schools to hold fundraisers that include the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value if the school district or charter school adopts a written policy that includes provisions such as limiting fundraisers to no more than 30 per semester at each school site.

PUSD spokeswoman Danielle Airey in a statement said, without seeing the proposed bill’s language, the district “would be pleased to support something that would allow parents to continue to champion our schools and our programs. Parents are our district’s number one supporters.”

Not everyone, however, is in support of the proposal. Cory Underhill, chairwoman of the PTSO at Frontier Elementary in Peoria, is one.

“From my standpoint, as a PTSO chair, mom, and teacher, I believe passing this legislation exempting school groups from the Smart Snack rules is a negative move,” she said, adding that she was speaking for herself. “While I understand the struggles schools have in raising funds for various needs, I don’t believe encouraging the sale of unhealthy food to be a good choice. I believe passing this legislation would be a step backward in trying to ensure schools are places that support healthy habits.”

She pointed to statistics showing that Arizona is the fourth most obese state in the United States for children.

At Frontier Elementary in Peoria, the new rules have caused groups like Student Council and the PTSO to rethink what they sell, but Ms. Underhill said she does not believe it has had a significant financial impact.

“Our biggest fundraiser the past two years has been a schoolwide fun run,” she said. “Again, while I
understand the need to raise funds for schools, I don’t think we should do it at the expense of our children’s health."

She said as a teacher, she sees enough unhealthy goodies come into the classroom on a daily and weekly basis for birthdays and individual snacks.

Ms. Brady, however, called the guidelines a huge over-reach by the federal government.

“Not speaking for the PTSO, but as a parent, I believe I am better qualified to determine what is best for my children, rather than a government entity,” she said. “Taking away an after school treat isn’t going to solve our nation’s obesity problem.”

If Ms. Lesko is successful, Arizona will be one of 20 states with an exemption policy, according to the National Association of State Boards of Education.

For example, in Colorado, each school building is allowed up to three exemptions for the 2014-15 year and in Nebraska one fundraiser per organization per semester, each lasting two days, is allowed. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a national philanthropy group that is devoted solely to the public’s health, could not comment on Ms. Lesko’s bill without seeing the language.

The group, in partnership with the Pew Charitable Trusts, found that 37 percent of children in Arizona are overweight or obese compared with one-third nationwide. The two groups also stated that providing students with access to healthy foods and beverages throughout the school day can improve the health of the state’s 1.1 million schoolchildren.