

Statement of Margo G. Wootan, D.Sc. Director, Nutrition Policy September 15, 2003

To feed children right, parents think about what to buy at the grocery store, what to fix for dinner and what to pack in their child's lunch. But just as importantly, parents need to work with their children's school -- where kids spend most of their waking hours -- to ensure that they serve healthy foods.

Unfortunately, too many of our nation's schools are selling soda pop, imitation fruit drinks, chips, snack cakes, candy and cookies to our kids through vending machines, school canteens, snack bars, fundraisers and a la carte lines.

Virtually all (98%) senior high schools, 75% of middle/junior high schools and 40% of elementary schools have vending machines, school stores or snack bars. The most common items sold out of vending machines, school stores and snack bars include soft drinks, sports drinks, fruit drinks that aren't 100% juice, salty snacks, candy, and baked goods that are not low in fat.

The only federal regulation covering school vending machines is that soft drinks, lollipops and other foods of minimal nutritional value cannot be sold in the cafeteria during meal times. However, they can be sold right outside the cafeteria at any time. Also, the regulations don't limit the sale of imitation fruit drinks, potato chips, candy bars, snack cakes and other low-nutrition foods.

To help parents, school administrators, health professionals and others improve the nutritional quality of foods in their schools, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) has developed the *School Foods Tool Kit*. The 62-page Kit includes background materials, fact sheets, tips on how to work with and influence school officials, how to garner community support for those changes, and model policies and materials.

Helping children eat better is more important than ever before. Only 2% of children (aged 2 to 19 years) eat a healthy diet consistent with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Guide Pyramid. Children eat too much saturated fat and calories and not enough fruits, vegetables, whole grains and calcium.

Obesity rates have doubled in children and tripled in teens over the last two decades. Not only does childhood obesity put children at future risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, cancer and diabetes, but it is already fueling a rise in type 2 diabetes in children, and 60% of overweight 5 to 10 year olds have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or other early warning sign for heart disease.

Between 1989 and 1996, children's calorie intake increased by about 80 to 230 extra calories per day (depending on the child's age and activity level). Children who drink soft drinks consume more calories and are more likely to be overweight, and soft-drink consumption by children increased 40% between

1989 and 1996, from an average of 1.0 to 1.4 cups per day. The average child now consumes 30 pounds of sugars from soft drinks each year.

Importantly, consumption of soft drinks also can displace healthier foods from children's diets like low-fat milk and 100% juice. The number of calories children consume from snacks increased by 30% between 1977 and 1996 – from 460 calories to 610 calories a day.

The answer to kids' excessive soft drink and snack food consumption is not just more physical activity. Children also need to consume less. Although physical activity is critically important to children's health and to maintaining a healthy weight, a 110-pound child would have to bike for 1 hour and 15 minutes to burn off just one 20-ounce Coke.

Schools should make improving the nutritional quality of foods and beverages a priority, and remove junk food from schools. Some of the worst foods sold in school vending machines are:

- · Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and other sugary sodas: a 20-ounce bottle provides 250 calories;
- · Fruitopia, FruitWorks and other imitation fruit drinks are just sodas without the fizz;
- Chocolate and other flavored whole and 2% milks provide calcium but at too high a cost. A 16-ounce chug of chocolate whole milk has 415 calories and half a day's worth of saturated fat:
- · Snack cakes like Hostess HOHOs are high in calories, heart-damaging fats and added sugars; and
- · A Kit Kat Big Kat candy bar has half a day's heart-damaging saturated fat.

Ideally every slot of vending machines should be devoted to healthy foods and drinks. We suggest schools start by changing to some practical alternatives that are better than what is currently in machines, such as:

- · Bottled water and flavored waters like Propel;
- · Fat-free or low-fat milk to help protect children's bones:
- · Fruits, which can help to reduce cancer and heart disease risk, like 100% orange juice, dried fruits like raisins, and shelf-stable applesauce or Dole or Del Monte fruit cups; and
- · Granola bars like Nature Valley Crunchy Granola Bars, Oats 'N Honey, which have fewer calories and less saturated fat than candy bars.

Some claim that schools must sell junk food to bridge budget gaps. It is shortsighted to fund our schools at the expense of our children's health. In the long run, we're sure to spend more on diet-related diseases than we can raise selling soda in schools.

Also, there are a growing number of examples of schools that have not lost money when healthier foods were substituted for low-nutrition foods in vending machines. For example, North Community High School in Minneapolis replaced most of its soda vending machines with machines stocked with 100% juices, sports drinks and water and slightly reduced the prices of healthy beverage options. As a result, the sale of healthier items increased and the school did not lose money. CSPI's School Kit includes other examples from Maine, California and other states.

Next we're going to hear from two people who have been using the kinds of approaches described in CSPI's *School Foods Tool Kit*. First will be Megan McGreevy of the Food Trust, which has been working to improve foods in Philadelphia schools. Next will be Tracy Fox, a nutritionist and mom, who has been working to improve foods in Montgomery County Schools, here in the DC metro area.