

## Statement by Margo Wootan Director, Nutrition Policy Center for Science in the Public Interest

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When parents send their children to school with lunch money, they expect that children will buy a balanced school lunch. Instead, banks of vending machines tempt children to dine on Coke, Snickers candy bars, and HOHOs.

School lunches and breakfasts are required to meet federal nutrition standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Congress. Most school meals are balanced, providing required amounts of calcium, protein, vitamins A and D, and other key nutrients. And while there's still work to be done, the fat, cholesterol, and sodium levels of school meals have been improving over the last ten years under the USDA's School Meals Initiative.

In contrast, foods high in saturated and trans fat, salt, and refined sugars can be sold out of vending machines, school stores, a la carte (snack) lines, and other venues outside of the school meal programs anywhere on school campuses anytime during the school day. The only federal regulation is that foods devoid of nutrients, like sodas, jelly beans, and lollipops, cannot be sold in the cafeteria during meal times. But the law is so weak that even those foods can be sold right outside the cafeteria at any time.

Vending machines are prevalent in schools. Virtually all high schools (98%) and three-quarters (74%) of middle/junior high schools have vending machines, school stores, or snack bars.

So we set out to determine how bad the vending machine problem is. In September and October of 2003, 120 school and health professionals surveyed the contents of 1,420 vending machines in 251 middle and high schools in 24 states.

The overwhelming majority of options in school vending machines are high in calories or low in nutrition. In both middle and high schools, 75% of beverage options and 85% of snacks are unhealthy.

Seventy percent of the beverage options are sugary drinks like soda pop, imitation juice drinks, iced tea, and sports drinks. Of the sodas available, only 14% are diet. Just 12% of the available beverages are water.



Though milk is an important source in children's diets of the calcium and vitamin D needed to build strong bones, only 5% of vending beverage options are milk. Unfortunately, the majority (57%) of that is whole or 2% milk, which are the biggest sources of artery-clogging saturated fat in children's diets.

The overwhelming majority (80%) of the snacks available in school vending machines are candy (42%), chips (25%), and cookies and snack cakes (13%). What children really need more of in their diets are fruits and vegetables – to provide key nutrients and reduce their future risk of heart disease and cancer. Of 9,700 total snack slots, only 26 contained a fruit or vegetable. Only 7% of the beverage options are fruit juice (*i.e.*, contain greater than 50% real juice). Though fruit juices can have as many calories as soda, they provide important nutrients and health benefits that soda does not.

The high prevalence of junk food in school vending machines undermines students' ability to make healthy food choices and parents' ability to feed their children well.

Most children cannot afford any more junk food in their diets. Only 2% of children eat a healthy diet. The rest eat diets with too much saturated fat, sodium, and refined sugars and too few nutrient-rich fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Those nutrient imbalances often lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, dental cavities, and other health problems.

Rates of obesity have doubled in children and tripled in teens over the last two decades, and obesity is poised to soon overtake smoking as the leading cause of death. Low levels of physical activity are part of the problem. However, national surveys clearly show that children are eating many more calories than in the past. Soft drinks and low-nutrition snack foods are key contributors to those extra calories. Children who consume more soft drinks consume more calories and are more likely to be overweight than kids who drink fewer soft drinks.

As Congress finishes up the reauthorization of the school meal programs this session, it should grant USDA the authority to set nutrition standards for all foods sold on school campuses throughout the school day. Implementation of those nutrition standards could be required as a condition for participating in the school meal programs.

Unlike other aspects of education that are primarily regulated at the state and local level, school foods have historically been regulated mostly at the federal level – by Congress and USDA – a precedent dating back to the Truman administration.

Why are schools and Congress putting our children's health at risk? The simple answer is money. Schools are facing serious budget shortfalls, and the food industry is all too eager to help. This is the ultimate example of being penny wise

and pound foolish. Society is sure to spend more money treating the resulting obesity, diabetes, and osteoporosis than schools could ever hope to raise by selling junk food to children.

Even in the short-term, schools are finding that they can raise funds without undermining children's diets and health. We know of 14 schools around the country (in California, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, and Pennsylvania) that have measured revenue before and after improving the nutritional quality of their foods, and not one of them lost money.

Given the troubling abundance of unhealthy options in school vending machines, the rising obesity and diabetes rates in children, and kids' poor eating habits, it's time to get junk food out of schools. While certainly this is not the sole solution to childhood obesity, it is a key step in addressing the problem. The Republicans in the House of Representatives would not allow strong provisions to get junk food out of schools in their child nutrition bill. Let's hope the Senate will find the political courage to do better by our kids.

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