
New York Times

Bill Strikes at Low-Nutrition Foods in School

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The days when children consume two orders of French fries in the school cafeteria and call it lunch may be numbered. A bipartisan group in Congress plans to introduce legislation today that would prohibit the sale in school not only of French fries but also of other fatty or sugary foods, including soft drinks.

Under the bill, an amendment to the National School Lunch Act, high nutritional standards would be required of all food sold on school premises. That means not just in cafeterias but in vending machines, school stores and snack bars as well, even at fund-raising events.

The measure, which has strong bipartisan support in both houses, would do on a national level what many school districts have been trying to do for years: require that the schools set an example by providing only healthful food and so perhaps reduce the incidence of childhood obesity.

Senator Lisa Murkowski, Republican of Alaska, has watched what goes on in the school her two teenage sons attend.

"We talk a lot about healthy nutrition, we teach the kids about the food pyramid, and then they go down the hallway and get the high fat, high sodium and high junk available in the vending machines," Ms. Murkowski said. "We need to be consistent. People are beginning to connect the dots between rising health care costs and obesity."

Senator Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat who has been pushing such a bill since 1994, said: "Congress is finally catching up with what parents have believed for a long time. Members of Congress are hearing from their constituents and recognizing this has become a national problem. I think finally members of Congress are asking, 'Why do we have soft drink vending machines in our schools?' "

The bill would apply to all foods other than the official school lunch, the meal for which schools receive government aid and which is already covered by other high-nutrition standards. Currently, sale of the other foods is permitted in school if they contain at least 5

percent of the recommended daily allowance of protein and certain vitamins and minerals. This standard applies regardless of the product's level of calories, fat, added sugars or sodium.

Under that approach, French fries, ice cream, candy bars, cookies, chips, snack cakes and doughnuts are allowed. Seltzer, jelly beans, chewing gum, lollipops, cotton candy and breath mints are not.

The new list of foods would take into account whether a product promoted obesity or chronic illnesses. The choices would come from recommendations of the Institute of Medicine, which expects to have a report ready this fall.

Enforcement would rest with the Department of Agriculture, which currently has authority only over the official school lunch. "The agency has done a good job with the official school lunch and could do a good job with all other food," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, which worked closely with Congress on the legislation.

Supporters of the bill have been marshaling evidence to contradict the usual criticism of proposals to serve only nutritious food in schools: that children will not eat it and that schools cannot afford to lose the revenue brought in by fatty or sugary products. A survey by the Agriculture Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that of 17 schools that began offering healthful options, 12 actually increased revenue while only one lost, marginally; the four others reported no change.

The American Beverage Association, a trade group, said the legislation was unnecessary because since last August members of the association have limited sales of full-calorie soft drinks to 50 percent of offerings in high schools. They are not available in lower grades. Frito-Lay, a leading manufacturer of snack foods, had no comment.

Despite the strong support for the bill among lawmakers, Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, was skeptical.

"My fear," Dr. Brownell said, "is that the food industry, with the soft drink industry taking the lead, will work its hardest to weaken or kill this act."