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Limit school vending machine drinks to non-sugary alternatives Florida school districts should limit vending machine drinks to non-sugary alternatives.

September 16, 2010

With kids increasingly losing the battle of the bulge, thanks at least in part to sugary drinks from school vending machines, Florida's Board of Education weighed a sensible antidote.

Expel sweetened drinks from schools, allowing only water, white low-fat milk and pure fruit juices.

Enter the beverage and dairy industries, and some state school districts, which found the proposal hard to swallow. Facing pushback, board members passed the buck to Uncle Sam, which is considering changes to school nutrition guidelines, including what goes into vending machines.

But what form the new federal standards might take, and when they will go into effect, is far from clear.

Which is why Florida shouldn't wait any longer. Whether it's the state or local districts, the adults who run Florida's schools need to stop selling sweetened beverages that are making kids fat.

In a recent newspaper column, state education board member John Padget, former Monroe County superintendent of schools, issued a call for Monroe to adopt "a new, thoughtful beverage rule" if the state board again wimps out when it revisits the issue, perhaps later this month.

That wouldn't surprise us, which is why Mr. Padget's call to jettison sugar-sweetened drinks is one that all school districts should heed.

There has been progress.

Most districts in Central Florida, for instance, have dumped soda. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently noted that more schools have added water to vending machines. But those bottles are largely taking up space.

Given a choice, kids overwhelmingly (71 percent) choose sweetened drinks, a 2006 study confirmed. These beverages heavily contribute to children's daily sugar and caloric intake, which leads not only to bulging bellies but also the growing problem of adult-onset diabetes in the U.S.

And while most high schools — which account for the bulk of school beverage sales — no longer sell soda, they still stock sugar-laden sports drinks and blended juice drinks.

This is not so much about thirsty students as it is cash-hungry schools. Vending contracts often defray the cost of athletic programs, after-school programs and other extracurricular activities.

In 2007, Orange County signed a lucrative contract with Pepsi Bottling Group to sell 100 percent juices as well as sports drinks, teas and sweetened vitamin waters. The CDC, meanwhile, reports between 10.5 percent to 12.5 percent of Orange high-schoolers are obese.

In a time of thinning budgets, districts can lose perspective — fattening up their budgets at the expense of healthier kids. Unacceptable.

In September, a study of more than 40,000 Californians directly linked the consumption of soda and other sweetened drinks with obesity. It would be irresponsible for schools, which sell to a captive audience, to ignore the sour health consequences of sugary drinks.

If the state board fails to act, county school boards should step in. Limit drinks to non-sweetened, non-carbonated bottled water, 1-percent white milk and 100-percent fruit juice.

We're not suggesting that schools play Pepsi police. If kids bring their own sodas or sports drinks from home, so be it. That's

between them and their parents.

But that doesn't mean schools should enable unhealthy habits that are contributing to a national health crisis.

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