

A National Survey of the Types and Extent of the Marketing of Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value in Schools

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	1
<i>What Causes Children to Eat Too Much Unhealthy Food?</i>	3
<i>Public Outcry Leads to Backlash</i>	7
<i>Advertising in Schools</i>	11
<i>The Purpose of this Research</i>	18
Methodology	20
<i>Survey Construction</i>	20
<i>Sample</i>	23
<i>Survey Validity and Reliability</i>	28
<i>Limitations</i>	33
Results	35
<i>Respondents</i>	35
<i>Type and Extent of Advertising</i>	35
Advertising that Generally Requires Official Consent	36
Sponsored Programs	36
Exclusive Agreements	36
Incentive Programs	37
Appropriation of Space	37
Advertising that Generally Does Not Require Official Consent	38
Electronic Marketing	39
Free Supplementary Materials	39
Fundraising	40
Extent of Advertising Activity	40
Exposure to Advertising	42
Income from Advertising Activity	42
<i>Privatization of Food Services</i>	45
<i>Attitudes of School Officials Toward the Regulation of Advertising in Schools</i>	45
Discussion	48
<i>For Future Study</i>	52
<i>Conclusion</i>	55
Appendix A: Survey Protocol	57
Appendix B: Survey Items with School Official Responses	58
Appendix C: Unique Combinations of Advertising Activities	87
Appendix D: Cross-tabulations of Responses to Items Measuring School Officials’ Attitudes Toward Increased Regulation of Advertising in Schools	91
Notes & References	93

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Executive Summary

This national survey of district public school officials finds that advertising in schools is pervasive, that it is dominated by corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar, that schools make little money from their participation in advertising, and that most schools' programs would not be reduced if advertising were eliminated. School officials tend to favor increased regulation of advertising in schools, particularly when that advertising is for foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar. The survey's findings, generalizable to all district public schools in the United States, call into question the common view that schools need advertising money to support key programs.

Advertising targeted at children, particularly with regard to foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar, is increasing in general and in schools nationwide. According to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, the rate

of childhood obesity has more than doubled over the past three decades. The American Academy of Pediatrics warns of the health complications of obesity to which children may become susceptible: high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes mellitus, coronary plaque formation, and psychosocial problems. The Institute of Medicine's 2005 report on food marketing to children and youth found that advertising influences children's food purchase requests and their beliefs about food, and that there is a strong relationship between advertising and how overweight children are.

Research conducted to this point provides limited information about the nature and degree of advertising in schools. The Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University has found considerable evidence from secondary sources that advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar content is prevalent in schools. These analyses, however, indirectly measure commercial activities in schools by tracking commercialism-related citations in the press rather than by gathering data directly from schools. The research reported here is the first to directly assess the nature and extent of advertising in schools nationwide.

A stratified random sample of 391 school officials at U.S. district public primary, middle, and high schools reported the extent of each of the following types of advertising activities at their school:

- Sponsorship of school programs and activities, such as sports teams, clubs, or scholarships.
- Exclusive agreements, such as an agreement for a school to sell only Coke products on campus.

- Sponsorship of incentive programs, such as Pizza Hut’s “Book It” program, in which children receive free pizza when they read a certain number of books.
- Appropriation of space on school property, such as when a sports field or laboratory is named after the corporation that donated funds to build it; or when corporations advertise on scoreboards, vending machine fronts, or cups provided at school.
- Sponsorship of educational materials, such as the “What’s on Your Plate?” program sponsored by McDonald’s.
- Electronic marketing, such as the provision of software or televisions, as done by Channel One (which requires that in exchange for the televisions, students view television programming with commercials daily).
- Fundraising, such as General Mills’ “Box Tops for Education” program, in which schools receive funds in exchange for labels and box tops turned in by families.

School officials also reported the amount of money their schools earned from advertising in the 2003-2004 academic year, whether their schools would have to reduce programs if advertising were eliminated at their school, and their attitudes toward increasing regulation of advertising, particularly advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar.

The key findings are:

- It is estimated that in American district public schools, between 33.4 and 36.7 million of the 42.2 million students in attendance are exposed to corporate

advertising, and between 26.6 and 30.3 million of those students are exposed to corporate advertising that involves a corporation that sells foods of minimal nutritional value or foods high in fat and sugar.

- 82.6 percent of district public schools have advertising by corporations in schools (24 percent have three or more corporate advertising activities in their schools).
- 67.2 percent of district public schools have advertising by corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value or foods high in fat and sugar.
- 43.0 percent of school officials report participating in fundraising programs run by corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value or foods high in fat and sugar.
- Of the schools that participate in income-generating advertising activities, 73.4 percent did not receive any income in the 2003-2004 academic year through activities with corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar. An additional 12.6 percent of schools received \$2,500 or less and 0.4 percent of schools that participated in income-generating advertising activities received more than \$50,000 from corporations that sell foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar.
- 60.6 percent of school officials support increasing the regulation of advertising in schools, and 68.5 percent support increasing the regulation of

advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value and foods high in fat and sugar in particular.

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Introduction

Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne echoed the sentiment of Kevin Costner's Iowa farmer in *Field of Dreams* when he noted about food in schools, "If you sell it, they will buy it."¹ He was referring to the results of a 2004-2005 pilot study at eight Arizona schools. The study found that schools that began offering healthy options at their school stores, snack bars, and vending machines experienced no negative financial impact.² Horne reached the same conclusion as other administrators whose schools have experimented with changing their food offerings:³ "If you sell unhealthy things, [the students] will buy that. But if you sell healthy foods, then they will buy that."

These observations are worth noting. Children in the U.S. buy a lot of high-fat, high-sugar snack food.⁴ The journal *Pediatrics* reported on the soft-drink consumption of 12,498 adolescents who participated in United States Department of Agriculture surveys

from 1965 through 1996: Researchers found that American teenagers drink more than twice as much sweetened soft drinks than they did in 1965,⁵ in containers whose sizes have increased substantially since then (from 12 oz in the 1960s to 20 oz by the late 1990s⁶). Added fats and sugars account for 40 percent of their daily energy intake.⁷

Perhaps not surprisingly, American children are increasingly obese. According to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies (IOM), over the past three decades the rate of childhood obesity has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2 to 5 years and for adolescents aged 12 to 19 years, and has more than tripled for children aged 6 to 10 years.⁸ The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) warn about the myriad illnesses to which obese children are susceptible.⁹ According to the AAP, complications of obesity include high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes mellitus, coronary plaque formation, and psychosocial problems.¹⁰

Simply put, people become obese because their caloric intake exceeds their energy output. The reasons for this imbalance are complex, and involve both the eating (energy intake) and activity (energy output) sides of the equation. This report focuses on advertising in schools that encourages children to eat foods high in fat and sugar content (FHFS), such as candy bars, pastries, cookies, french fries, and pizza, as well as foods classified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as “foods of minimal nutritional value” (FMNV). Foods of minimal nutritional value, including sodas, “water ices,” and certain candies,¹¹ provide “empty calories”—calories that are not accompanied by other nutritional benefits, such as amino acids, fiber, vitamins, or minerals.¹²

Although these foods may not necessarily always be “bad” or “unhealthy” in and of themselves, the fact is that American teenagers generally fail to meet the *2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, which recommends that children two years old and older be physically active at least one hour each day and eat a diet low in fat, sugar, and sodium, and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.¹³ California’s Public Health Institute found that only 2 percent of California teenagers met all five diet and activity recommendations of the *2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.¹⁴ Current concern about FMNV and FHFS arises largely from the awareness that millions of American children, in and out of school, consume large amounts of these foods. In these large amounts, particularly without extensive physical activity, FMNV and FHFS qualify for the label of “unhealthy foods.” This being the case, and particularly in light of the fact that schools’ health and nutrition curricula encourage children to minimize consumption of these foods, advertising in schools intended to promote the consumption of FMNV and FHFS is inherently problematic.

What Causes Children to Eat Too Much Unhealthy Food?

Unhealthy Foods Are Abundant

Foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNV) and foods high in fat and sugar content (FHFS) – together popularly referred to as “junk foods” – are heavily advertised to children.¹⁵ Moreover, children like them.¹⁶ Advertising encourages children to pester their parents to buy these foods, and, as soon as children are old enough to make independent purchases, to buy them for themselves.¹⁷

In schools, these items are sold in addition to, or in competition with, food sold as part of the National School Lunch Program. Foods that are not part of the National School Lunch Program are referred to as “competitive foods,” and schools are permitted to sell them as “à la carte” items in the cafeteria and in the vending machines, snack shops, and school stores.¹⁸ Although foods offered through the National School Lunch Program are regulated to limit fat, provide specific minimum levels of vitamins and nutrients, and eliminate foods of minimal nutritional value, competitive foods are not similarly regulated.¹⁹ The only federal regulation regarding these foods is that FMNV may not be served in food service areas during mealtimes.²⁰ In effect, this regulation affects only a small number of food products and does not prevent them from being sold, for example, on campus right outside the cafeteria doors during meals.

When both are available, students often prefer the heavily-advertised, competitive foods to the healthier foods offered as school meals.²¹ A 2000 study examining the à la carte offerings at 19 suburban junior and senior high schools in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area found that à la carte sales were highest for foods in the cookie, nondairy drink, vegetable, milk, and entrée categories. In the vegetable category, sales were higher for french fries than for all other vegetables, and in the entrée category, sales were highest for pizza and hamburgers.²² A 2003 study examining the eating behaviors of 598 seventh-grade students in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area found that, on average, students in schools with à la carte programs ate fewer fruits and vegetables, and got more of their daily calories from fat than did students in schools without à la carte programs.²³

Actions taken to restrict the availability of competitive foods vary widely from state to state and by locality.²⁴ Not only do regulations vary – so does enforcement. At

one high school in Maryland, for example, where state law prohibits schools from turning on vending machines until after the final lunch period, a reporter found vending machines to be on all day. Indeed, the school's contract with Pepsi contained a clause that suspended the \$55,000 in annual commission that the school would receive as a result of soft drink sales in the event that the Board of Education actually started to enforce the state regulations.²⁵

Pediatricians are particularly concerned about the role sweetened soft drinks play in providing excess calories to children, and warn against their sale and advertising in schools.²⁶ A May 2005 article published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* pointed out that among all the unhealthy foods that children consume, soft drinks are the most problematic because they are the number-one source of added sugars in the American diet.²⁷ Together, sweetened soft drinks and sweetened fruit drinks account for 35 percent of the added sugars consumed by children aged 6 to 11. That percentage rises to 48 percent for girls aged 12 to 17 and 53 percent for boys aged 12 to 17.²⁸ A 2004 study that used an intervention program to promote alternative drinks found that less than one cup of sweetened soft drink per day affected children's weight.²⁹ This study examined 644 English schoolchildren aged 7 to 11. Children in the treatment group learned about nutrition and participated in activities designed to help them reduce their intake of sweetened soft drinks. They decreased their carbonated soft drink consumption by 150 ml per day, whereas children in the control group increased consumption by 50 ml per day. After one year, the percentage of overweight and obese children decreased in the treatment group by 0.2 percent, but increased in the control group by 7.5 percent.

