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Ontario Introduces Healthy Menu to Elementary Schools

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The Ontario government is doing away with sugary drinks, chocolate bars and chips in its elementary school vending machines.

Education Minister Gerard Kennedy announced Wednesday that the province is banning junk foods from the machines in schools with students in kindergarten to Grade 8. The goal is to promote healthy choices and help battle childhood obesity.

Among those foods on the banned list: pop, sports drinks, candy bars, and many types of chips and cookies.

"We've gotten into some bad habits over the last number of years," Mr. Kennedy said during a press conference at Parkdale Junior and Senior Public School in Toronto. "We've been relying on foods that are dispensed through vending machines as a source of income for education."

The foods will be replaced by healthier choices suggested by the Dietitians of Canada, such as milk, yogurt-based drinks, 100-per-cent fruit juice and water. New snacks include some granola bars, muffins, yogurt, cheese, pretzels and popcorn.

"Nutrition is one of the major factors affecting a child's growth and development," said Laurie Curry, chairwoman of Dietitians of Canada board of directors.

"Since roughly one-third of a child's food intake for the day occurs during the school day, Dietitians of Canada is pleased to have the opportunity to influence children's food choices through our collaboration with the Ministry of Education on the development of guidelines for appropriate foods served through elementary school vending machines."

Mr. Kennedy said that while there is still much work to be done in getting education funding to the level it needs to be, the time has come to stop raising money by selling junk food to young students.

"It is in that context that we're saying to the education community that it is time to do the right thing," he said. "The right thing is to make good foods available for students in our schools."

Conservative MPP Frank Klees slammed the move, accusing the Liberal government of interfering in parental decisions and undermining the authority of school boards.

"The minister of education is assuming the role of official parent for Ontario's children," Mr. Klees said. "What equips this Minister of Education with the omniscient wisdom to be the nutritionist at large for the province of Ontario?"

According to statistics released with the Ontario government plan, approximately 27 per cent of boys and 23 per cent of girls in Grades 6 and 8 eat candy and chocolate bars on a daily basis.

The province had previously tried a voluntary ban on junk food, but many of Ontario's 72 school boards did not comply. All schools will be required to report back to the government by Jan. 14, 2005, on implementing the new healthy choices.

"Many school boards and schools have already eliminated junk food from their vending machines and adopted healthy schools policies," Mr. Kennedy said. "Others have asked us for clear direction on what's acceptable, and we're providing that today."

"We expect all boards to fully comply with the new nutritional guidelines and replace junk food with healthier food and beverage choices as soon as possible."

The vending machine ban will not extend to high schools, whose students are already free to leave school property to buy their own meals.