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Legislator Seeks School Junk-Food Ban

Thousands of Dollars from Drink, Snack Sales Could Be Lost Each Year

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Anne Ryman

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Arizona students will no longer be able to buy soft drinks and candy during the school day if a bill introduced in the state Legislature this week becomes law.

Rep. Mark Anderson, R-Mesa, introduced the legislation as schools throughout the country are feeling the pressure to sell healthier snacks and beverages in vending machines and snack bars.

Anderson said schools have a responsibility to help students be healthy.

"If we graduate someone to pass the AIMS test but he only lives until 30, that's not a very good outcome," he said.

The school nutrition legislation, HB 2544, would prohibit K-12 public schools from selling soft drinks and foods of "minimal nutritional value" such as candy, chewing gum, lollipops and licorice.

Many schools have resisted banning soft-drink and snacks because they bring in thousands of dollars each year. Money from snack bars and vending machines often fund school clubs, field trips and athletic gear. In Glendale, contracts with soft-drink companies guarantee high schools at least \$32,000 to \$50,000 a year.

The bill applies only to food served during school, so concession stands at football games and evening events would be exempt. The legislation comes just days before the release of the Arizona Department of Education's pilot study, which looks at whether schools get hit financially by offering healthier snacks and drinks.

Soft-drink and vending machine companies oppose the legislation.

"Targeting just the schools on snack vending or beverages is not going to solve this very complex issue," said Todd Elliott, president of the Arizona Automatic Merchandising Council, a group of vending machine companies and food supplies. Elliott said the legislation ignores the role that exercise and nutrition play in children's health.

School districts in Los Angeles, New York City and Seattle have banned soft-drink sales, along with other high-calorie, low-nutrient foods over rising concerns about childhood obesity. It's tough to get a statewide ban because of opposition from food and beverage companies and even schools, who argue they need the snack money to stay in the black. West Virginia and Texas have been successful in banning candy and soft drinks in elementary schools.

Scottsdale parent Christine Roadifer, who has two children in elementary school, said that she supports efforts to make schools healthier but that the state should then put more money toward education to offset any money lost by snack sales.

Ronda Speno has a first-grader at Desert Willow Elementary School in Phoenix and said the state should regulate school snacks. "Our schools aren't doing a very good job when it comes to health," she said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has restrictions on what's served in school cafeterias, but many schools sell snacks outside the cafeteria during lunch to make money. These snacks are not required to meet federal standards for fat and calories. The sales have continued despite a 2001 USDA report that warned that snack foods compete with lunch and may contribute to unhealthy eating.

The Arizona legislation would direct the state Department of Education to develop nutrition standards for snacks and beverages.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne wouldn't say Thursday whether he supports or opposes the legislation. However, he and Anderson will be having a news conference together next week.

On Tuesday, Horne will announce the results of eight schools that tested a ban on soft drinks and junk food during the school day.

The schools increased physical activity, educated students about nutrition and changed their vending machines to offer options like granola and peanuts.

"If the study shows schools can make as much money selling health foods as selling sugar and saturated fat, then it would make sense to require foods to have healthy foods in their vending machines," Horne said.

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-6881.