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Soda Distributors to End Most School Sales

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NEW YORK - The nation's largest beverage distributors have agreed to halt nearly all sales of sodas to public schools — a step that will remove the sugary, caloric drinks from vending machines and cafeterias around the country.

The agreement was announced Wednesday by the William J. Clinton Foundation and will also likely apply to many private and parochial schools.

"This is a bold step forward in the struggle to help 35 million young people lead healthier lives," former President Clinton said at a news conference. "This one policy can add years and years and years to the lives of a very large number of young people."

Under the agreement, the companies also have agreed to sell only water, unsweetened juice and low-fat milks to elementary and middle schools. Diet sodas would be sold only to high schools.

"I don't think anyone should underestimate the influence this agreement will have," Susan Neely, president and CEO of the American Beverage Association, which has signed onto the deal, said earlier Wednesday. "I think other people are going to want to follow this agreement because it just makes sense."

The agreement should reach an estimated 87 percent of the public and private school drink market, Neely said. Industry giants Cadbury Schweppes PLC, Coca-Cola Co. and PepsiCo Inc. and the ABA have signed on. Officials said they hope companies representing the other 13 percent of the market would follow suit.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a collaboration between Clinton's foundation and the American Heart Association, helped broker the deal.

"The soft drink industry has decided that it won't wait to be pushed," said Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, the co-chair of the alliance. "It jumped in. ... It may be the soft drink industry, but they made a very hard decision."

The move follows a mounting wave of regulation by school boards and legislators alarmed by reports of rising childhood obesity. Soda has been a particular target of those fighting obesity because of its caloric content and popularity among children.

Still, the deal imposes stricter drink regulations than are currently in place for nearly 35 million public school students.

"This is really the beginning of a major effort to modify childhood obesity at the level of the school systems," said Robert H. Eckel, the president of the Heart Association, adding that the alliance would also be working to put healthier foods in schools.

John Sicher, editor and publisher of Beverage Digest, which compiles extensive data on the beverage industry, said the agreement would have no impact on the \$63 billion beverage industry's bottom line.

"The sale of sugar-carbonated sodas in schools is a tiny, tiny part of their overall volume," said Sicher. "Financially, on the big companies, it will have virtually no impact."

He applauded the move, however, saying "The impact is more in terms of responsibility and accountability to the consumer."

Under the agreement, high schools will still be able to sell low-calorie drinks that contain less than 10 calories per serving, as well as drinks that are considered nutritious, such as juice, sports drinks and low-fat milk. The "nutritious" drinks will be limited to 12-ounce servings, Neely said.

Elementary schools will sell 8-ounce servings of the "nutritious" drinks, and middle school kids will get 10-ounce-size drinks.

Whole milk will no longer be offered to any schools, Neely said.

School sales of sports drinks, diet sodas and bottled water have been on the rise in recent years, while sugary soft drink purchases by students have been falling, according to an ABA report released in December. But regular soda, averaging 150 calories a can, is still the most popular drink, accounting for 45 percent of drinks sold in schools in 2005, according to the report.

Diana Garza, a spokeswoman for the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co., said in a telephone interview that "these voluntary guidelines escalate ... the shift to lower calorie, more nutritious beverages."

A man who answered the phone at Cadbury Schweppes' London headquarters said no one was available for comment. A call to PepsiCo Inc. was not immediately returned.

The new rules will apply to beverages sold on school grounds during the regular school day and at after-school activities such as band and choir practice, said Jay Carson, a spokesman for ClintonBut sales at events such as school plays, band concerts and sporting events, where a significant portion of the audience are adults, won't be affected, he said.

The deal will be most easily enforced at vending machines, where students buy most of their drinks, Neely said.

How quickly the changes take hold will depend in part on individual school districts' willingness to alter existing contracts, The Alliance for a Healthier Generation said in a release. The companies will work to implement the changes at 75 percent of the nation's public schools before the 2008-2009 school year, and at all public schools a year later.

Dozens of states have considered legislation on school nutrition this year, but about 32 states still have no legislative or regulatory policy regulating the sale of drinks in schools, according to the American Heart Association.

Lawmakers in Connecticut voted last week to prohibit schools from selling regular and diet soda as well as electrolyte replacement drinks such as Gatorade.

The agreement follows an August decision by the ABA to adopt a policy limiting soft drinks in high schools to no more than 50 percent of the selections in vending machines. Unlike the agreement announced Wednesday, that recommendation was not binding.

Most elementary schools are already soda-free.

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Associated Press Writers Karen Matthews, Nahal Toosi and Ula Ilnytsky contributed to this report.