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Shut the Spigot on School Soda

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IT'S SATISFYING to see the soda industry accepting what California has already recognized -- that chugging down sugary sodas during the school day could be harmful to the health of our children.

Three years ago, California became the first state to ban soda sales in elementary and middle schools. When Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger came to office, he challenged the Legislature to do more. In a meeting with The Chronicle Editorial Board, he said the Legislature should "just pass a law that says you are not going to have any junk food in the schools because it is destroying our kids."

That's exactly what the Legislature did. Last year, it extended the state's soda ban to high schools as well -- and went even further by passing a law eliminating junk food peddled in school cafeterias, snack bars and vending machines.

Faced with the prospect of similar bans being enacted by states across the country, beverage giants such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi announced that they would voluntarily stop selling syrupy sodas in most public schools.

While the actions announced by the industry represent a welcome step forward, they don't go far enough. One weakness is that they allow for the continuing sale of diet sodas in high schools. In contrast, California's ban also covers diet soda. "No one could show us that diet soda has any nutritional value," said Suzanne Wierbinsky, chief of staff to state Sen. Martha Escutia, D-Whittier, who authored the legislation.

Like the industry's plan, a major drawback of the state's soda law is that schools don't have to implement it until the 2009-10 school year.

Why wait? It makes no sense to continue to tempt kids with drinks that even the industry now accepts as being unhealthy.

Without being forced to do so, many California school districts, including some of the state's largest such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, have already moved aggressively to eliminate soda and junk foods from their schools. They've somehow survived the shock of the transition.

Other wavering school districts should do the same. Three more years of consuming high-calorie drinks -- in or out of the classroom -- will only add to the problem of childhood obesity in California.

Benzene Formation in Diet Soft Drinks
<http://www.schoolpouringrights.com>