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Policy Brief **2**

Food Advertising and Marketing to Children and Youth: Do They Influence Unhealthy Food Purchases?

California youth, like their peers across the country, continue to face a nutrition and physical activity crisis. Today's youth generally fail to meet the *2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* that recommend children two years and older eat a diet which is low in fat, sugar, and sodium, and high in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. The *2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* also recommend that children two years and older be physically active at least one hour each day. However, a California study found that only two percent of teenagers met all five diet and activity recommendations.⁽¹⁾ Among children in grades, five, seven, and nine who were tested with California's mandated physical fitness test in 2003, 75 percent failed to meet the state's minimum fitness standards and in 2002 more than one-quarter were overweight.⁽²⁾

Schools play a significant role in providing food to children and in shaping children's acquisition of lifetime dietary habits. In a 2003 study of California high schools, more than 70 percent of the responding districts reported selling pizza, chips, cookies, and soda a la carte (sold outside the federal reimbursable meal program). In comparison, there was only one healthy item (fruit) that was sold a la carte by over 70 percent of the responding districts.⁽³⁾

Food marketing aimed at children and youth now reaches young people almost everywhere they are throughout the day from television to in-school and in-store marketing, to kids clubs, magazines, the Internet, and toy products. The most prevalent forms of marketing to children are television and in-school marketing.⁽⁴⁾

Why are Children and Youth Targeted with Food Marketing?

Marketers recognize that children and youth are a major market force because of their spending power, purchasing influence, and future as adult consumers. The estimates of spending by children and youth are between \$25 and \$140 billion a year.⁽⁵⁾ Children and youth also influence another \$500 billion of family and other spending per year.⁽⁵⁾

Businesses see schools as an opportunity to make direct sales and to cultivate brand loyalty. School-based marketing also adds credibility to marketing activities by associating the company's name and product with trusted schools or teachers.⁽⁶⁾

Advertising in Schools Has Become Big Business

Commercial activities in schools have become increasingly common over the past decade. Such activities come in the form of:

1. Product sales through vending machines, soft drink "pouring rights" agreements, branded fast food and fundraisers.
2. Direct advertising, such as food and beverage ads in schools.
3. Indirect advertising, such as corporate sponsored educational programs, sports sponsorships, and incentive programs using contests and coupons.^(7,8)

In a 2000 study of California high schools, nearly 72 percent of responding districts allowed advertising for fast food and beverages on high school campuses, while only 13 percent prohibited such advertising.⁽⁹⁾ In a follow-up survey in 2003, the most common fast food or beverage advertisement on high school campuses were advertisements on vending machines (48%), scoreboards or signs (31%), and posters (23%).⁽³⁾

Many companies engage cash-strapped schools by offering marketing dollars as a way for schools to bridge budget gaps. Of all product sales in schools, exclusive soft-drink contracts are the fastest growing ventures.⁽⁷⁾ In exchange for financial compensation, schools or school districts sign exclusive beverage contracts with soft drink companies that allow advertising through product donations, scoreboards and marquees, signage, clothing, and school supplies. The more beverages sold the higher the commissions for the district and soft drink company.⁽¹⁰⁾ Such agreements promote soft drink consumption by students.

The heavy marketing directed towards youth is driven largely by the desire to develop brand awareness and brand loyalty. Marketers believe brand preference begins before purchase behavior does.⁽¹¹⁾ These practices are significant because a study of primary school children found that exposure to advertising influenced which foods children claimed to like; and another study showed that labeling and signage on a vending machine had an effect on what was bought by secondary school students.⁽¹²⁾

Movement Against Advertising in Schools

The National Association of State Boards of Education developed a policy on school/business relationships that states "selling or providing access to a captive audience in the classroom for commercial purposes is exploitation and a violation of public trust."

Some school districts have agreed and moved to protect students from commercial influences. For example in 1999, the San Francisco Unified School District's Board of Education passed the "Commercial-Free Schools Act" which set limits on in-school advertising. The act forbids teachers from using curriculum that includes unnecessary brand name advertising, forbids the district from entering into a district-wide exclusive soft drink or snack food contract, and requires the Board of Education to approve all long-term corporate sponsorships.

Most common fast food or beverage advertisement on California high school campuses ⁽³⁾

- **Vending machines** **48%**
- **Scoreboards or Signs** **31%**
- **Posters** **23%**

Promising Policy Directions

The growing epidemic of childhood obesity highlights the role that food and beverage advertising plays in influencing youth eating behaviors. While not all commercial communications with youth are inappropriate, some feel youth are a vulnerable group that should be protected from commercial influences which may adversely impact their health. The following are recommended strategies for moderating commercial influences at schools:

1. **Eliminate the sale and marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages at school.**
 - Apply the nutrition standards enacted in the Pupil Nutrition, Health, and Achievement Act of 2001 (Chapter 913, Statutes of 2001, Escutia) (SB 19) and the California Childhood Obesity Prevention Act (Chapter 415, Statutes of 2003, Ortiz) (SB 677) to all foods sold at California elementary, middle, and high schools.
 - Eliminate school-based advertising and promotion of food and beverage items that do not comply with the nutrition standards enacted in the Pupil Nutrition, Health, and Achievement Act of 2001 (SB 19).

2. **Educate youth to be smart consumers of food advertising.**
 - Provide healthy eating and physical activity campaigns to help balance and counteract the influence of advertising of low-nutrition foods.
 - Develop and disseminate school-based curricula that teach youth media literacy skills which help them to be informed consumers of the media.
3. **Develop and implement local school district policies that set guidelines for school-based advertising.**

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Public Health Institute
555 12th Street, 10th Floor
Oakland, CA 94607-4046
Phone: 510.285.5500
Fax: 510.285.5501
Web: www.phi.org