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Policy Brief

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 dietary guidelines for Americans that recommend children two years and older eat a diet consisting of nutrient dense foods. This includes eating foods that are low in fat, sugar and sodium, eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and consuming fat-free or low-fat milk or milk products. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans also recommend that children two years and older be physically active at least one hour each day on most, but preferably all days of the week. 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 2004, 73 percent failed to meet the state's minimum fitness standards and 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 awareness and 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*, such as soft drinks, fast food and snack items sold out of vending machines, student stores, food carts, and snack bars, as well as exclusive soft drink and branded food contracts. This also includes fundraising activities.
2. *Direct advertising*, such as food and beverage ads placed around campus on buses, scoreboards, billboards, posters, banners, and on book covers. Also common are advertisements on the public announcement system or on classroom television broadcasts.
3. *Indirect advertising*, such as corporate sponsored educational programs, sports sponsorships, and incentive programs using contests, coupons and products.^{7,8}
4. *Market research*, including student surveys or panels, product pilot or taste tests that expose students to a company's product.

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 A 2006 California study found that 60 percent of the posters and signage for food and beverage products on responding high school campuses promote foods high in sugar, sodium and fat.¹⁰ Additionally, 65 percent of vending machine ads and 71 percent of logos displayed on equipment were for soda and other sweetened beverages.¹⁰

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.¹¹ Such agreements promote soft drink consumption by students.

Marketers believe brand preference begins before purchase behavior does.¹² 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.¹³



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.

The vast majority of all advertising on school campuses—posters, vending ads, events, come from soda, fast food, and junk food companies.¹⁰

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 marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages at school.**
 - New local wellness policies should include promotional activities that encourage students to consume fruits and vegetables, low-fat and non-fat milk, and water.
- 2. Eliminate commercial influences that promote unhealthy foods and beverages in district curriculum, classroom materials and on campus.**
 - Review resources provided by outside sources, including curriculum and Channel One broadcasts used in the classroom, to ensure they do not promote unhealthy foods and beverages.
 - Prohibit any district curriculum from including identifiable brand names in the content of the curriculum.
 - Restrict teachers from using identifiable brand names in their instruction unless absolutely necessary to teaching the lesson.
- 3. Include consumer education as part of the curriculum.**
 - Adopt school-based curricula that teach youth media literacy skills which teach them to be informed consumers of the media.

4. Set guidelines for business partnerships that restrict marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages.

- Encourage partnerships with business that do not include product advertising to students.
- For school staff with the responsibility of entering into business partnerships, conduct trainings on the perils of marketing unhealthy foods on campus.

Captive Kids: Selling Obesity at Schools is a resource to help stop the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages on school campuses. Visit www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org.

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