
Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Seattle, WA

Seattle Schools Urged To End Deal With Coca-Cola

June 27, 2003

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Seattle Public Schools should dump the Coca-Cola company or at least give the district's students options for buying healthy beverages.

That's the message that more than a dozen area residents had for School Board members last night at a public hearing.

They cited studies that put the "massive content of sugar in pop" at the center of childhood obesity and other health problems and painted a moral morass in which the district makes money from the sale of unhealthy products.

"So, sell horrible products to students in order to fund (programs for them)?" asked Ted Lockery, a teacher at Nathan Hale High School. "It's immoral."

No one spoke in favor of Coke's five-year, exclusive contract to sell pop out of vending machines to schoolchildren in the district. The contract, which netted nearly \$400,000 for use in schools last year alone, expires Aug. 31.

The board was airing the possible renewal of the contract after a committee recommended it be extended another five years with one change: cutting off sales of pop during school hours in middle schools.

The district first heard reasons to dump the contract from a representative of the Citizens Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools, and then details of the contract's lucrative side from its deputy legal counsel, Ron English. But the public held the floor for more than an hour.

Alexandra Duncan, a senior at Roosevelt High School, argued students can make good choices but need the opportunity to make them. She and a half-dozen other young women sat with signs saying: "Seattle students want milk all day long."

She said she didn't understand why the issue of allowing other healthier drinks to be sold outside cafeterias at schools was even being debated. "Students need and want other healthy options."

English told the board that the current contract with Coke does not prohibit schools from allowing milk to be sold from vending machines in the halls. He said West Seattle High School had already experimented with selling milk, but results from that effort were not yet known.

He said the committee had recommended restricting Coke's sales in middle schools out of one main concern: "Shouldn't schools set an example in the health arena?"

English said nixing the contract altogether would cost the district more than \$400,000 next year, money that individual schools have used to help fund yearbooks, newspapers, sports and drama programs in the high schools, and camp scholarships, field trips, dances and the Writers in Residence program in middle schools.

He added that the recommended middle school restrictions in the contract would cost the district \$40,000. The School Board will vote on the contract extension Wednesday.

One parent of a recent graduate of Garfield High said she worried the sales of pop out in the halls of the schools sends the wrong message to students. The commercialism targeted at them undermines the image of schools as a "benign institution."

She said school issues shouldn't center on "how much profit can be wrung out of kids."

THE VOTE

The Seattle Public Schools Board Of Directors' next meeting is Wednesday (July 2), when they will vote on a measure that would authorize the superintendent to extend its contract with Coca-Cola Beverages of Washington Inc. for cold beverage vending machine services from Sept. 1 through Aug. 31, 2008. The extension provides that carbonated soft drinks will not be available to middle school students during school hours.