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Disservice to Kids: Assembly Panel Chokes on Soft Drink Bill

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The Assembly Health Committee had a chance to make a powerful statement about the public schools' role in students' nutrition. But the committee retreated when it came time to vote on Sen. Debra Ortiz's bill SB 677, which would have barred the sale of sodas on school campuses by 2006.

At the behest of chairman Dario Frommer, D-Los Angeles, the bill was scaled back to affect only elementary and middle schools, leaving California high schools -- where the bulk of school-based sodas are sold and consumed -- still swimming in Coke and Pepsi. That will allow the soda makers to continue duking it out in public high schools, where school districts shamelessly allow them to compete for and encourage teens' pop-slurping habits.

It's ironic that in the same week one of America's biggest snack makers, Kraft Foods, announced it would stop marketing its products in schools, reduce the size of some individually packaged chips and cookies, and cut back on the sugar and fat in certain products.

Maybe Kraft found its conscience. Or maybe the company wants to protect its reputation. Like McDonald's, which has promised to cut back on unhealthy trans fat when cooking its french fries, and Frito-Lay, which is looking for healthier oils in which to fry its chips, Kraft wants to get ahead of growing sentiment that the country's addiction to some processed and fast foods in big portions is contributing to bulging waistlines. Nobody wants to look like an abettor of Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

That presumably includes the Assembly Health Committee, though its reluctance to make California a leader on the soda issue would suggest otherwise.