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School Vending Machines Losing Favor

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NEW YORK (Reuters) -- As popularity contests go, vending machines may no longer be part of the "in" crowd in American high schools. At least, that is the hope of some legislators and health advocates.

Last month, for example, the largest U.S. school district -- located in New York City -- decided to ban soft drinks, sweet snacks and candy from its vending machines. And more legislation, both state and local, is expected as legislators and educators battle a growing obesity epidemic.

"Over the last two years, we've noticed a vast increase in the number of bills introduced that would restrict or ban the sale of certain items in schools," said Tom McMahon, chief counsel for the National Automatic Merchandising Association, which represents companies that supply vending machines.

"At least 30 states have considered legislation," McMahon said. He says nutrition education, not bans, should be used to teach children about healthy eating habits.

But health advocates say education is not enough; schools should encourage good eating habits by offering healthy items like milk and unsalted pretzels while cutting access to junk foods.

"Vending sends the wrong message to children," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "Schools should practice what they teach. They should teach nutrition in the classroom and they should model it in the hallways."

Revenue source

Banning sweets and other snacks means weaning schools off a revenue source at a time when schools are scrambling for money to fund even basic services.

For instance, California recently passed a law restricting the sale of soda, candy and fried chips in elementary and middle schools. But written into the bill was a provision that it can't take effect until funding becomes available to replace the vending machine revenue, raising concerns it may never be implemented.

Health advocates say the choice between nutrition and revenue is a false one. By offering nutritious items that also taste good, schools can keep kids healthy without giving up vending-machine dollars, Wootan said.

"A lot of schools have replaced soft drinks with healthier foods and they have not lost money," Wootan said.

Major vending companies say they are protected from bans and restrictions since they offer a range of products.

"It's a real asset of Pepsi Bottling Group system to offer a wide portfolio of products, from good-for-you products like Aquafina water or Dole fruit juices to fun products like Mountain Dew or Pepsi," said Kelly McAndrew, a spokeswoman for Pepsi Bottling Group Inc. School vending makes up less than 1 percent of the company's total revenue, she said.

Indeed, in many vending contracts, decisions about what products to offer are made by administrators and teachers, in concert with the vending company.

Critics expressed concern not only about nutritional value, but also about big companies getting a captive and impressionable audience for their marketing message.

"We were told Coke makes very little money on our five-year exclusive contract so the implication is they're in the schools mainly to brand our kids," said Brita Butler-Wall, director of Seattle-based Citizens Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools.

A Coca-Cola Co. spokeswoman declined to specify financial terms of school contracts, but said, "We are in the schools because the schools are asking us to be there. We want our beverages to be wherever thirsty people are."

The Seattle school district earns about \$330,000 a year from its vending machine contracts, Butler-Wall said.

"Soft drink and other food companies are in schools to make sales now and also to cultivate brand loyalty so they can sell to children for the rest of their lives," Wootan said.

Some companies are taking notice and trying to stay ahead of the curve on legislation. Earlier this month, Kraft Foods Inc. said it would stop marketing in schools.