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**Financial Times, London**

**Health Lobby Aims to Burst School Drink Vending Bubble**

**August 5, 2003**

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Thirsty adolescents at Seattle's middle schools, used to being able to get a chilled Coca-Cola from vending machines any time they like, face a rude shock next year; drinks machines will not sell fizzy drinks until after school hours.

New York City, meanwhile, is going further by banning "sodas", candy and doughnuts from school vending machines.

A pledge to stop marketing and advertising its products in schools - though not to stop selling them there - was also a central part of plans unveiled last month by Kraft Foods, the maker of Oreo cookies and Philadelphia cheese, to combat the global obesity epidemic.

The moves signal important changes in the relationship between the US food industry and schools.

As their budgets have been squeezed, school boards - which run public schools in their area - have come to rely on the revenue from commercial partnerships.

Soft drink and snack companies have signed exclusive contracts with school boards, offering financial incentives for stocking only their products in vending machines. The contracts were highly lucrative, and proceeds per school could be tens of thousands of dollars. Companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi have been attracted not just by the sales themselves but by the chance to develop lifelong brand loyalty in children.

Yet obesity is growing fastest among young people.

A US study published in The Lancet medical journal in 2001 found the odds of obesity among children increased 1.6 times for each extra can of sugar-sweetened drink they consumed daily.

Things have moved quickly since a June conference of campaigners and lawyers on "legal approaches to the obesity epidemic" identified school contracts as the next target.

After the conference Professor John Banzhaf, a George Washington University law professor who spearheaded litigation against tobacco companies, wrote to the Seattle school board.

Its members, Mr Banzhaf warned, might not be immune from lawsuits over breach of their responsibility to children if they renewed a five-year contract with Coca-Cola, worth Dollars 400,000 (Pounds 250,000) a year.

"I believe a school board has no legal authority to raise money by selling its students as a market for private business," he says.

The Seattle board eventually voted 4-3 to renew the contract - but with big changes. Machines selling carbonated drinks will be turned off before and during classes, and a third of vending slots must be reserved for water or juice.

Crucially, the board reserved the right to modify or cancel the contract without penalty. Barbara Peterson, a Seattle board member who voted to renew the Coca-Cola deal, says the decision was tough. The proceeds support activities such as athletics, drama, and school yearbooks. "Our district has gone through some significant financial challenges over the past year, and if we didn't renew the contract we were going to add another burden to our schools," she says.

Such dilemmas will face many school boards. Mr Banzhaf says lawyers in Houston, Dallas and Boston are examining similar action.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, one of the biggest, has decided to ban soft drink sales from 2004. Attitudes are changing elsewhere, too. Cadbury Schweppes, UK confectionery group, was attacked over a promotion encouraging children to collect tokens that could be exchanged for school sports equipment.

The promotion would not have raised eyebrows a few years ago. But Cadbury was accused by the Food Commission, a lobbying group, of cynically using sport to legitimize unhealthy foods.

Last week the Food Commission joined the Centre for Science in the Public Interest - a US campaign group - to seek a ban on marketing "high-energy, low-nutrient" foods in schools.

Analysts say that since schools account for little over 1 percent of Coca-Cola's and Pepsi's sales even a ban on carbonated drinks there would have little impact. But schoolchildren might grow up without the same brand loyalty - or even the same taste for fizzy drinks - as their forebears.

The National Soft Drink Association, the US industry lobby, says at least as many school boards are voting to renew soft drinks contracts as to terminate them, and insists bans are misguided.

"Bans are going to do absolutely nothing to get rid of sedentary lifestyles, and educate children on how to make wise food choices," the Association says. "It comes down to a lifestyle change."