

## Poison for Sale

His belly hangs over his belt like a semi-inflated inner tube. His fleshy arms protrude like sausages from the extremely tight-fitting sleeves of his T-shirt. In the otherwise quiet hallway, the sound of his pant legs chafing together over his thick thighs is almost deafening. Other students sometimes laugh when he passes and make fun of him behind his back. This kid is seriously overweight. But the saddest part of this story is that he is only in the fourth grade. How did he get this way? Many recent studies show that childhood consumption of soda pop and junk food is a “growing” problem for this generation of kids, yet students are currently able (and encouraged) to buy as much of this low-nutrition, high-calorie food and drink as they want from school vending machines. Clearly, this is hypocritical of schools to claim that they want to do what is best for students, but then provide easy access to products that will shorten the students’ lives. Pop and candy machines do not belong in public schools. First, the machines are a constant temptation for students to make unhealthy dietary choices. Second, the money the machines bring in is not worth the health cost to students. Finally, there are other side effects to vending machines that affect the school environment. The vending machines currently in most public schools are doing more harm than good and should be removed.

By putting vending machines in schools, administrators are seducing kids into a dangerous lifestyle. By providing easy access to pop and candy, schools imply that it is okay to live off this sort of food because the machines are in direct competition with school lunch. While most students may complain that school lunch is often less than tasty, at least there are state and federal guidelines that require it to be somewhat nutritious. There are no such guidelines to govern the vending machines. Obviously, when given the choice of high-sugar, high-fat treats over school lunch, many students will choose the treats because they are not mature enough to consider what the future may bring: heart disease, diabetes, chronic obesity, and other health problems caused by a lifetime of soda and junk food consumption. As with many addictions, poor eating habits start when people are young; a lifetime of exposure to junk food teaches kids that it is part of a normal diet. By putting pop and candy machines in the schools, administrators are ensuring that students begin to develop poor eating habits early in life. Some argue that just because the candy and pop is available does not mean that students *have* to buy it, but many of them do because they do not know any better. It is the job of the school to protect young people from their own immaturity, and while we would never dream of allowing cigarette machines in schools, we allow the sale of “food” which is actually more dangerous. The number one killer of adults in the United States is still heart disease, not cancer, and heart disease stems mainly from obesity and unhealthy eating habits. So, while the schools claim to be educating students against unhealthy habits like smoking and drug use, they are actually supporting an even more dangerous thing by allowing students access to pop and candy machines. Clearly, student health is not the issue that administrators consider when it comes to vending machines. It’s money.

Pop and candy machines at some high schools bring in quite a bit of money—maybe 600 dollars a month. At this junior high, the pop and candy machines make about 200 dollars a month. While administrators may claim that this money funds important

school programs, it is really not enough to have any profound effect on the quality of our school. Consider that our current technology campaign is trying to bring in thousands of dollars in only two weeks, and that is only to keep our old computers hobbling along for a few more years, when millions will be necessary to upgrade. The amount of money the pop and candy machines bring to the school every month is not even enough to purchase *one* new computer. Administrators argue that “every little bit helps,” but compared to the massive amount of money the schools actually need, the vending machine proceeds are almost nothing. We could easily do without the “extra” money every month because it doesn’t amount to that much. The money the vending machines generate for the school is negligible, but the medical costs for overweight kids with diabetes and coronary artery disease--not to mention hyperactivity, which is made worse by the caffeine in many types of soda--is growing all the time. The money that vending machines bring in is not worth the ultimate cost to students’ health.

Besides the health and money issues, there are other negative side effects to having vending machines in schools. For one, the school is filthy. Since the machines were brought in two years ago, the halls are littered with wrappers and cans almost daily. The commons are like a garbage dump after lunch. Ironically, this causes the administration to turn the machines off so students cannot purchase pop and candy, yet the administration will also argue that “whether we provide it or not, kids will get it anyway.” If this is true, how come turning the machines off always seems to solve the litter problem? Obviously, it’s because the kids aren’t bringing stuff in from the outside; they are buying it at school (often with their “lunch money”) and throwing their trash in the hallways. Another negative side effect of pop and candy availability is the sugar rush that many students spend much of their day on. Many students, mostly boys, will proudly down two Mountain Dews for breakfast, and then spend the morning unable to sit still in class because the sugar and caffeine in their systems makes them practically quiver. They can’t sit still, so they often cause class disruptions and thereby obstruct learning for other students. At lunch, these same students eat a Snickers bar and a bag of high-carb chips, along with yet another soda, so by the time school is out they have enough caffeine, sugar, and carbohydrates in their system to paralyze a whale. Not only is this unhealthy for the students themselves, but when they express the hyperactivity brought on by this diet, they prevent themselves and other students from getting an education. The side effects of pop and candy machines go beyond health and money. They make it harder for the school to do what it is supposed to be doing: teach students.

As you can see, pop and candy machines have no place in schools. They encourage kids to develop an unhealthy diet that will hurt them later in life; they do not bring in enough money to make themselves worthwhile; and they cause other negative side effects like litter and hyperactivity. But there’s not much chance of seeing a change in the near future because the legislature (who sees no problem with commanding all students to take a hundred tests against their will in order to graduate) doesn’t want to infringe on those students’ “rights” to poison themselves. The only stand we can take that will have any effect is to quit buying pop and candy from the machines, and I hope you will join me in doing so today.