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States Consider Forbidding Snack, Soda Sales

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Armed with new data on the increasing level of childhood obesity in the United States, at least a dozen states are taking aim at the lucrative business of selling soft drinks and snacks in public schools. Across the country, state legislators have introduced bills that would ban or limit the sales of sugary drinks, candy, or fatty snack foods in K-12 schools. Driving the spate of legislation is a wide range of pediatric-health concerns, particularly a sharp increase in obesity.

"We don't allow kids to smoke in schools, we have zero tolerance for violence in schools, and I believe this falls into the same category," said Minnesota Rep. Gene P. Pelowski, who has introduced a House bill on behalf of the state's dentists that would prohibit the sale of soft drinks on school property.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 13 percent of 6- to 11-year-olds and 14 percent of 12- to 19-year-olds are considered overweight, based on a formula that considers age, weight, and height.

Proposals to cut soft drink and snack sales at schools have provoked controversy, however. In some of the states where such legislative efforts are under way, school boards and administrators have mounted strong challenges to protect what has become a valuable revenue source for schools.

The tenor of the debate was particularly fierce in California, where a bill was introduced in this legislative session that would have banned sugary drinks and placed strict nutritional standards on all foods sold in schools. After intense lobbying by groups that included the Association of California School Administrators, the bill was scaled back so that the restrictions are limited to elementary schools and to middle and high schools that volunteer for a 10-school pilot program.

It was a bittersweet victory for some of the education groups that opposed the original bill.

"We're in a position where the state has said, 'Hey, we're not going to give you as much money, so get innovative,' and that's what we did, and now we're being attacked for it," said Brett McFaddin, a legislative advocate for the administrators' association. "We know what is being sold to the kids is not the best, but state funding for schools has dropped ... over the last 10 years. At the end of the day, districts are accountable to their constituents, and they must have balanced budgets."

Minnesota schools raise about \$40 million a year through soft drink sales, said Dick Anderson, the executive director of the Minnesota School Boards Association in Saint Peter, which opposes the bill introduced in that state by Rep. Pelowski. "Schools didn't just dive into this because they said, 'Look, here's a lucrative opportunity,'" Mr. Anderson said. "Most of this revenue is turned around and poured back into student activities, which one would think should have been provided by the state legislature. You could make a case that if the legislature mandates schools give up this revenue, they should be refunded for that."

The National Soft Drink Association rejects any direct link between consumption of such beverages in schools and childhood weight problems. The Washington-based group is keeping an eye on 12 states that are considering some sort of restriction on soft drink sales in schools, including California, Hawaii, Minnesota, Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wisconsin.

"These folks are well-intentioned, but they're misguided," said Shawn McBride, a spokesman for the soft drink group. "We have a problem with pediatric obesity and obesity of adults in general, but it's developed over the last 20 or 30 years, and it's largely because we are a more sedentary society."

"I think we're always looking for a quick fix," Mr. McBride added, "but soft drinks aren't the real problem."