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Wean the Schools from the Soda Habit

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Editorial

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The most prominent feature in the airy courtyard at Cupertino's Homestead High School is a colorful row of Pepsi vending machines. You can't miss them. Three large machines, next to one dispensing spring water and Dole fruit drinks, are housed in a dark green metal enclosure decorated with a mustang, the school's mascot. Another Pepsi dispenser is conveniently housed across the courtyard in the school cafeteria.

An occasional Pepsi, or Coke or Sprite, is a harmless vice. But at 7:35 a.m.? Junior Paige Harkness says it's not unusual to see classmates showing up for first-period classes clutching a Pepsi. One student regularly plunks down not one but two sodas -- usually a Pepsi and a Mountain Dew -- in front of him in her third-period math class. Starting Time: 9:30 a.m.

Freshman and sophomores are especially susceptible to the on-campus soda peddlers. "It's the cool thing to do," says senior Michael Preysman, editor in chief of the school newspaper, The Epitaph. "It's a lot more trendy than sitting there with your water or apple juice."

Trendy they may be. But these machines, along with similar ones in virtually every public school district in the state, are contributing to the crisis of obesity that is ruining the lives of too many of our children. Nearly 30 percent of California's children are overweight. Three-fourths of our fifth-, seventh- and ninth-graders flunked the state's physical-fitness test. And a study at Boston's Children's Hospital showed that daily consumption of even a single can of sugar-laden soda vastly increases a child's odds of becoming obese.

Some of the state's largest school districts -- Oakland, San Francisco and Los Angeles -- have moved to restrict the sale of sodas on school campuses. But they remain the exception.

That's why we support Senate Bill 677, which will ban most soda sales in all public elementary schools beginning on Sept. 1, 2005, and restrict their sale on middle- and high-school campuses beginning on Sept. 1, 2006. At those schools, sales would be banned only during school hours (for the complete bill, see www.leginfo.ca.gov).

The Senate is expected to vote on the bill as soon as today. If lawmakers put the health of our children first, the very reasonable bill would pass easily. But a big obstacle is the allure of the cash some schools reap from lucrative contracts with bottling companies.

Homestead, like the four other high schools in its South Bay district, has an exclusive contract with Pepsi. In return, the five schools are guaranteed a combined \$150,000 a year from Pepsi for the next decade, regardless of how much kids buy. The funds will go to support the schools' athletic and visual and performing arts programs.

Sure, it may be tough to walk away from that kind of money in the middle of a budget crisis. But the bill, authored by Sen. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, gives school districts ample time to prepare for a soda-free environment.

More importantly, restricting soda sales does not mean a school has to give up all, or even some, of the income it receives. That's what Aptos Middle School in San Francisco found after beginning a bold experiment in January to provide nutritious foods on campus. In place of sodas, vending machines were stocked with milk, water and fruit juices. Amazingly, sales so far have exceeded what the school made from sodas the previous year.

"To give up the opportunity to educate a whole generation of consumers about what is healthy, wholesome and good because we are too lazy, or because we want to make a few more bucks for the sports team, is unconscionable," says Dr. Carmen Nevarez, medical director of the Public Health Institute, a nonprofit research institute in Berkeley.

We sympathize with the struggle of schools to save worthy programs. But that task should not come at the expense of our children's physical and emotional well-being.

If nothing else, the enticement of ice-cold Pepsis or Cokes just outside the classroom door makes it far more difficult for parents to persuade their children to spurn potentially hazardous food products. For good reason, the Senate's Health Committee approved Ortiz's bill. Now it's up to the full Senate to do the same.