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**Advocates Push For More Healthy Foods in Schools,  
They Cheered the Move Against Soda in Philadelphia**

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Canning the sale of soda in Philadelphia's public schools is a good first step, but the district must also improve the nutritional value of its school-lunch program and the snacks it sells, nutrition advocates said yesterday.

Citing concerns about students' poor nutrition and a growing obesity problem, district chief executive Paul G. Vallas announced earlier this week that he planned to ban the sale of soda in schools when the district finalized a beverage deal.

"This is a strong statement about the role of the schools in helping children develop healthy eating habits... . We applaud this decision," said Karima Rose, who spoke at a School Reform Commission meeting yesterday.

After the meeting, Rose said: "Let's take a step further. Let's look at the snacks. Let's look at the foods that are being served in the a la carte [offerings] and the lunches."

Rose, who belongs to a group involved in a pilot nutrition project in the city schools called Food Trust, also said the district should phase in a requirement over several years for all juices to be 100 percent juice. The final decision on whether to ban soda will be up to the commission as it considers a contract with beverage companies.

Vallas said the district also was contemplating other steps toward better nutrition.

It has brought on a team of school-lunch experts from the Council of the Great City Schools to evaluate the quality of district lunches, he said. One parent complained yesterday that french fries were too readily available.

The district also is reconsidering the snacks it allows to be sold, Vallas said. Students now can purchase ice cream bars, potato chips and cupcakes, among other snacks.

"We should be dispensing and selling things in the schools that are of nutritional value," he said.

The district also is planning to "anchor" nutrition education in its new science curriculum, which is being developed.

The district has about 700 vending machines in its schools and administrative offices. About half of those are in cafeterias, which by federal law cannot carry sodas for sale.

They sell juices, water and sports drinks, among other beverages.

There are 247 machines in faculty lounges, and they include soda, which probably will continue to be sold.

And 116 machines are in school hallways. They also carry soda, which would be eliminated. Most of them are in high schools, Vallas said.

If the district bans the sale of soda, it will join a growing number of school districts around the country that are taking steps to improve nutrition. Both New York and Los Angeles have announced bans on soda.

Vallas said he hoped the decision on an exclusive beverage contract would be made by the end of the summer.

The Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Co., which is one of the bidders, said a ban on soda would not cause a problem. The company already does a lot of business in the district, and 82 percent of those sales are non-carbonated beverages, said Domenic Celenza, vice president of cold-drink sales.

"Within the negotiation with the district, they've expressed that they want to play the primary role in the products that are vended, and we told them we agree," he said.

Cecilia James, a grandparent of four district children, attended yesterday's meeting with a jar filled with two cups of sugar, the amount that she said a child drinks on average in sodas over a week. She said some sodas also contained caffeine, which can cause children to lose sleep and become irritable.

"We need not balance our budget at the risk of our children's health," said James, of the Philadelphia Coalition for Healthy Children.