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Kick Candy to Curb

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Editorial

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If students did this much damage, they would be expelled. If teachers were this risky for kids to be around, they would be fired.

So it's high time to kick sodas, candy and high-fat snacks out of Arizona schools.

Sugar-filled, nutrition-challenged goodies are contributing to an epidemic of childhood obesity. The percentage of kids ages 6 to 19 who are overweight is 15 percent, triple the rate in 1980.

Obesity is fueling a frightening rise in the number of youthful diabetes. An estimated one in 50 American kids suffers from Type 2 diabetes, which is known as "adult onset" diabetes because it used to be found almost exclusively among older people.

Lack of exercise, not just diet, plays a role in fattening up our kids. Empty-calorie snacks at school are just part of the problem.

But schools should be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

The state Board of Education is considering a voluntary ban on junk food in schools. The vote could come at its Sept. 23 meeting.

The proposed ban would extend to school-sponsored events, which may be a step too far. Goodies at football games or carnivals are time-honored traditions. But on a day-to-day basis, our kids will benefit if foods of "minimal nutritional value," such as soda, gum and candy, are excluded.

Some naysayers will point out that parents pack less-than-nutritious lunches for their kids. Sure. But that doesn't mean schools should offer and thus tacitly endorse junk food.

Because what happens, warns the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is that kids replace all or part of their lunch with snacks. Instead of the calcium from milk, they get sugar from soft drinks, as much as 15 to 20 teaspoons a day for the average teenager, according to one expert.

A tougher problem is that schools are hooked on the profits from selling junk food. Mesa, Scottsdale and other large school districts can raise \$2 million a year in snack sales.

Money or our kids' health?

It's not an exaggeration.

We may need a period to wean schools away from snack food profits. Student groups will have to find other ways to raise money, like carwashes or garage sales. The Department of Education is planning a pilot study in eight schools to measure the impact of switching to healthier snacks.

Banning junk food is a controversial move, debated around the nation, but it's not an untrodden path. In 2002, the Oakland Unified School District in California pulled the plug on soda and candy sales, including at student fund-raisers.

The financial blow may be less than expected. In other parts of the country, some schools are still racking up sales with healthier snacks, including bottled water, juices, nuts and raisins.

And their students are learning that Pepsi and Coke don't have to be part of the school day.