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Vending Machines Removal Draws Local Attention

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Area districts follow Pierre and explore issue.

Pop and junk food vending machines are a thing of the past at T.F. Riggs High School in Pierre.

Monday, the first day of school in Pierre after the holidays, also marked the first day without the machines. The school board decided to get rid of the machines because of concerns about students' eating habits.

Brad Olson, president of the Aberdeen school board, said Monday that removing pop and junk food machines from Central High School in Aberdeen would certainly be worthy of board discussion if enough parents support such a move.

The downside to the Pierre board's decision is an expected loss of revenue. The district received a percentage of the pop sales for use by various school groups, Riggs Principal Mike Fugitt said Monday. The district's share amounts to several thousands of dollars annually, he said.

The argument that schools need the money from pop sales holds no water with Sherlock Hirning, Eureka School superintendent. "Then we might as well legalize prostitution, too, so schools can make even more money," he said. Prostitutes could be available at school events, he said in jest.

"That's how asinine the argument for pop machines really is," Hirning said. "If I had my way we'd get them all out of school."

By a school board decision, Eureka School limited access to pop machines at the beginning of the 2003-04 school year; they are shut off until noon.

The dental and physical health risks of poor nutrition are real, Hirning said, and pop and junk food machines in schools are part of the problem. "Society is going to pay for this somewhere down the road," he said. "Someday research will show it was not a wise choice for us to do this."

Obesity, tooth decay, diabetes and osteoporosis are all health problems associated with eating too much junk food and drinking excessive quantities of soda pop, said Dr. Bernie Linn, a Pierre physician and member of the Pierre school board. He made his comment in a news release from South Dakota Action for Healthy Kids.

The action group applauds the decision by the Pierre board. Several major school districts, including Los Angeles and New York, have pulled pop machines from their buildings, the news release said.

Gary Harms, superintendent of Aberdeen public schools, said he's not taking sides on the vending machine issue. "This would be a board decision, and I would support whatever the board would decide," he said.

Harms said that although he agrees schools should model good behavior, such machines in schools are not the only cause of obesity in the United States. But that doesn't mean he's trying to justify having the machines in schools, he said.

The Pierre high school will continue to receive some money from vending machine sales because students still have access to machines that dispense bottles of juice, water and sports drinks, and snacks not considered junk food such as granola bars, Fugitt said. But the income is expected to decrease.

As for the removal of pop and junk food machines, "I haven't heard of lot of negative reaction, which is a little surprising," Fugitt said Monday afternoon. Students knew in advance the machines would be gone because the school board decided in the fall to remove them over the holidays.

"So there was some expected grumbling earlier on," Fugitt said. Riggs' students are not allowed to bring their own pop to school, either. Pop is still sold at the concession stand at school events, he said