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Should Sugary Drinks or Other High-Calorie Foods be banned in Public Schools?

Perhaps the public health implications of sugary drinks and other high-calorie foods are the most compelling argument for more stringent policies and regulations, including bans in public spaces such as schools. However, there is more than meets the eye. Admittedly, the debate has remained prevalently complicated with proponents of the measures basing their views on the adverse effects of the sale of sugary food in public schools. The rates of health complications such as obesity and other underlying conditions related to weight gain are alarmingly high. On the other hand, critics are more reprehensive about these measures arguing that these measures are ineffective. Some note that removing sweet beverages and other sugary products in schools will prompt students to find substitutes. Often, proponents of limiting access to unhealthy sugary food make assumptions that it translates to healthier lifestyles. They fail to acknowledge that it is almost impossible or unfeasible to determine all sources of unhealthy sugary foods and other high-calorie food; individuals can respond with other substitute sources. Therefore, selling and marketing of sugary drinks and other high-calorie food should not be banned in schools since these measures are ineffective, cut off revenue to public schools, and other viable alternatives for regulating accessibility to excess sugars in schools.

The debate on the sale and marketing of sweetened food in public schools has been significantly misinterpreted by proponents of the ban and other similar kinds of regulations and policies. From a policy evaluation perspective, banning the sale and marketing of sugary drinks

and other high-calorie food is ineffective as far as its purpose is concerned. Often, bans aim to reduce the disparaging health and social implications of sugary drinks and other sweetened processed foods. However, these measures are significantly inefficient and only worsen the situation by prompting children to look for alternative or substitute sources. Carla Kemp, a senior editor at AAP News and Journal, quotes a study of 6,900 students in 40 public schools across the US. According to the study results, prohibiting the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages in schools limited the students' accessibility to these products within the school environment only. However, it was inefficient in limiting the overall accessibility as well as their overall consumption of sugary products.

These efforts are seemingly worthless and do little good concerning the reduced the student's accessibility to sugary products. Anahad O'Connor, a reporter for *The New York Times*, found a similar situation in two separate studies in the US. The first study examined several students drawn from public institutions of learning students across at least 40 states in the US. The second study examined the consumption rates of sweetened food and drinks among approximately 7000 fifth and eighth-graders drawn from over forty states in the US. In the first study, researchers discovered that "removing soda from cafeterias and school vending machines only prompted students to buy sports drinks, sweetened fruit drinks, and other sugar-laden beverages instead" (O'Connor par.6). In the second study, the researcher discovered that the rate of students buying sugary drinks at schools in states with bans was 28.9 %, while the proportion in states with no bans was 26%. Notably, the ratios are nearly marginal considering the size of sampled population for the study. Nonetheless, the two studies found equivalent levels of sugar and high-calorie accessibility at school.

Arguably, school bans prompt students from finding alternative sources of sugary products or other ways of compensating for the restrictions on consumption. It includes increasing the consumption rates at the household level. It also suggests that the problem is more profound than it is perceived in the political debates. Some critics shift the focus on schools as the source of the problem and blame such factors as parenting. Shirlee Lichtman based her views on a study by Anderson and Butcher, who found out that access to unhealthy food, primarily sweetened food and drinks, increases students' body mass index (BMI) among adolescents with overweight parents who are not necessarily obese. It tells us that consuming sugary drinks boils down to eating habits, including eating behaviors associated with parenting. Furthermore, it speaks volumes concerning the appropriateness and feasibility of policies such as school bans on sugary products. J. Weston Phippen, a writer for National Journal Magazine and columnist for *the Atlantic Magazine*, examines the challenges posed by the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, one of the pro-ban policies brought by first lady Michelle Obama. The food cooked for students in schools as substituted to the banned sugary food is pathetic and causes other problems such as waste due to dumping, sneaking and student-run spices black market. Phippen summarizes the extent to which pro-ban policies such as Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act are challenging, complex and costly, stating that:

"The regulations require too much, too fast, and don't take into consideration that kids can opt-out of eating, critics say. Part of the law requires that each student take a portion of vegetables and fruit. If a student doesn't, a cashier is obliged to place a serving on their plate. So, not only do students throw the tortillas in the trash, but they also dump their applesauce, oranges, milk, and little plastic baggies of carrots. This has led to increased waste. As a result of the swap in healthier, less appealing food, 1.4 million children have opted out of school lunch. The pressure to serve sometimes more costly, healthy food and the decline of lunch participation has led some schools to lose a lot of money" (Phippen par.8).

Elsewhere, a ban on the sale of sweetened products such as beverages and high-calorie food cut off revenue generation among public schools in the US. According to Lichtman,

Competitive foods have a pivotal source of revenue for many schools across the US increasingly. She argues that the proceeds generated from the sale of competitive foods that essentially include sweetened beverages and high-calorie food such as pizza are directly used to fund school projects. Additionally, the revenue proceeds are also used to financially support extra-curricular activities, including club expenditures or financial needs for athletic activities, which usually receive little funds from the more conventional revenue resources to schools (5). An excellent example in which sugary foods generate revenue to institutions is through exclusive agreements. Lichtman notes that large school districts in the US enter into exclusivity agreements with beverage providers who are entitled to provide competitive beverages for the entire school district; in return, the school benefit through higher commission rates allocated to the schools and school districts. Restrictions and bans on competitive foods such as beverages jeopardize the school revenue streams. It becomes alarmingly devastating when the school loses its revenue stream to ineffective policies that focus on wrong targets. The bans will close down sales within the school environment allowing vendors outside the school to tap into the opportunities that would have otherwise benefit the schools. More so, students will involve themselves in disciplinary cases such as sneaking and student-run spices black market.

Nonetheless, students will opt for meals outside the school environment or increase the consumption at the household level, where they can freely do so. The school and its policy have little control. It shows how schools might lose; schools will incur the cost of implementing ineffective pro-ban policies and losses resulting from jeopardized revenue streams. It is also often imperative to evaluate options and interrogate alternatives before making judgments about issues such as access to sugars and calories and their public health implications. Like other consumable products such as alcohol and cigarettes, sugar and calories in sweetened foods have

alternative intervention approaches that are effective and viable. Lustig et al. argue that it might be helpful for policymakers to scrutinize the experience of other policies used in products such as alcohol and tobacco to find models that practically work. They contend that individually focused approaches such as diet and exercise have proved little efficacy. Meanwhile, bans are costly and complex as well as significantly ineffective.

Conversely, there are proven approaches such as taxation, distribution control, age limits that have effectively work; there are robust evidence supporting their effectiveness in lowering both consumption of the product and the consequences of consumption, primarily the health repercussions. According to Lustig (28), taxing alcohol and tobacco products using legal avenues such as special excise duties, value-added taxes, and sales taxes are the most popular and effective strategies for curbing smoking and drinking, which translates to positive outcomes in public health. Consequently, policymakers should consider more stringent taxation policies on processed foods. Capewell suggests that sugar-sweetened drinks should have warning labels about the underlying harms such as obesity and other conditions. David H. Freedman, a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, suggests that instead of bans that seemingly demonize sugary foods, we should turn back at them and engineer the next generation of a food revolution. He argues that:

"In virtually every realm of human existence, we turn to technology to help us solve our problems. But even in Silicon Valley, when it comes to food and obesity, technology—or at least food-processing technology—is widely treated as if it *is* a problem. The solution, from this viewpoint, necessarily involves turning our back on it" (Freedman par.10)

Therefore, instead of banning sugary foods, schools should turn them to teach students the importance of healthy eating habits. The alternatives previously mentioned are effective both within the school environment as well as at the household level. For instance, taxes cut across sales and marketing in school and outside school.

In conclusion, the sales and marketing of sugary drinks and other high-calorie food should not be banned in schools since these measures are ineffective, cut off revenue to public schools, and other viable alternatives for regulating accessibility to excess sugars in schools. Banning does not stop students from accessing sugary products; it prompts them to find alternative sources of sugary products, such as substituting them with household consumption. It shows how these approaches are ineffective and do not enable schools to achieve the bottom-line objectives. Bans also cut off sources of revenue proceeds that would otherwise be used to directly fund school projects and extra-curricular activities, such as clubs or athletic activities. Elsewhere, there are other alternatives and viable ideas that can be implemented without jeopardizing school revenue streams. These strategies are also effective in accomplishing the objectives of reducing consumption and accessibility.

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