

Food and Beverage Marketing in Schools

Putting Student Health at the Head of the Class

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Children and adolescents in the United States consume too many calories, including empty calories from foods and beverages high in sugar and saturated fat, placing them at risk for obesity and obesity-related diseases including type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and cancer.¹⁻³ Yet food companies



Related article

continue to directly target young people with marketing for products that contribute to poor health. They spend \$1.8 billion annually in youth-targeted marketing, with the promotion of fast food, sugary drinks, sugary breakfast cereals, and candy accounting for 90% of these expenditures.⁴ Although companies have promised to market healthier choices to children younger than 12 years of age, there have been few improvements in the overall landscape of food marketed to children.⁵ In addition, companies continue to view children 12 years of age and older as an important target market and outside the scope of current self-regulatory initiatives.⁶

Marketing in schools is one tool in the food companies' diverse toolbox to encourage children and adolescents to consume their brands and recruit lifelong loyal customers. In 2009, food and beverage companies spent \$149 million on in-school marketing. This amount represents 8% of total youth-targeted food marketing expenditures and the third-largest category of promotional activity behind television and premiums.⁴ Carbonated and other sugary beverages account for more than 90% of school-based marketing expenditures, followed by fast food. Snack foods, candy, and baked goods, as well as dairy products, also are marketed in schools. Most of these products are high in sugar, calories, and fat and are inconsistent with recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.⁷

The school environment provides an optimal setting for companies to reach youth, but this marketing raises significant public health concerns. Students are "a captive audience," exposed to school-based marketing messages multiple times over the almost 200 days per year they spend in school. Continuous exposure to brand logos directly increases long-term preferences for brands.⁸ Furthermore, school-based marketing occurs without parental interference. Even if parents are aware of marketing to their children in school, their ability to change these practices is limited. In addition, marketing in schools implies the school's endorsement of the products. How can schools effectively teach good nutrition when the products they tell children to limit are featured in school halls, cafeterias, vending machines, and athletic fields? All too often school officials believe that corpo-

rate support provides an acceptable solution to address budget shortfalls. However, this short-term solution comes with the potential for long-term detriment to students' health and well-being.

In this month's *JAMA Pediatrics*, Terry-McElrath and colleagues⁹ provide an important contribution to our understanding of the prevalence and types of food and beverage marketing in schools. To our knowledge, their article⁹ is the first to quantify food marketing in a national sample of schools and to measure changes over a 6-year period. Many of the findings are surprising and disturbing. Almost two-thirds of elementary schools provide food coupons as student incentives (eg, Pizza Hut's Book It program¹⁰ and Sonic Limeades for Learning¹¹). In cafeterias, 10% of elementary schools and 30% of high schools serve branded fast food weekly; 19% of high schools serve it every day. From 2007 to 2012, only middle schools exhibited a significant reduction in food marketing, while 70% of elementary- and middle-school students continue to encounter some form of food-related marketing. Although incidence is low at 6%, posters or other ads for soft drinks, fast food, and candy increased steadily in elementary schools from 2008. Vending contracts remain prevalent but contribute minimal financial support: approximately \$2 to \$4 per student annually. Not surprisingly, middle and high schools with a high percentage of low-income students have more exclusive vending beverage contracts than other schools.

The school-based food and beverage marketing described in Terry-McElrath et al⁹ understates the overall picture. As documented by others,^{4,12-15} the full range of in-school marketing practices is even broader. Branded fundraising sponsored by food companies is common, including direct sales of products (eg, David's Cookies¹⁶ and Hershey's candy¹⁷) and reward programs for families' purchases (eg, General Mills' Box Tops for Education¹⁸ and My Coke Rewards for schools¹⁹). Ronald McDonald visits elementary schools to teach children about healthy eating,²⁰ and fast food restaurants donate a percent of the night's proceeds in return for in-school promotions.²¹ Soda and sports drink logos are commonly featured on donated school equipment such as scoreboards and beverage coolers.¹⁵ Food marketing also enters the classroom through display advertising on Internet search engines and educational websites such as coolmath-games.com²² and Channel One News.²³

Across all demographic groups, two-thirds of parents support regulations to limit advertising and sponsorships of unhealthy foods and beverages in schools, a higher level of support than regulations on food marketing to children in any other

venue.²⁴ The majority of school officials also support such regulations.¹⁴ Currently, however, most efforts to reduce unhealthy food marketing in schools rely on industry self-regulation, which has limitations. For example, companies that participate in the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative pledge to refrain from advertising branded foods in elementary schools.⁶ Unfortunately, this program excludes common forms of in-school marketing, including corporate-sponsored fundraising, charitable donations, and curricular materials²⁵; advertising for products available for sale in school⁶; and advertising in middle and high schools.²⁶ Strengthening these loopholes in the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative would be an important step in creating healthier school environments. Another opportunity to improve school-based food and beverage marketing is through the Alliance for a Healthier Generation. Since 2004, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation has brokered agreements with beverage companies to replace vending of full-calorie sodas in schools with that of lower-calorie beverages.²⁷ The program has resulted in 90% fewer beverage calories shipped to schools but does not address beverage marketing. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation also should negotiate limits on common forms of sugary-drink marketing in schools, including branded scoreboards, uniforms, and equipment; sampling during athletic practices; and branding on vending machine exteriors, display racks, and coolers. Furthermore, food and beverage companies could independently eliminate unhealthy marketing in schools to support students' health.

If companies choose to continue marketing unhealthy foods and beverages in schools, states and school districts

have significant leeway to restrict advertising to students in public schools.²⁸ In 2007, Maine enacted legislation (the only state thus far) to limit marketing of foods of minimal nutritional value in all public schools. The law covers product sales, direct advertising (including the use of brand names and logos), and indirect advertising (including sponsorships, curricular materials, and reward/incentive programs).¹⁵ Local school districts and schools can limit food advertising in schools and across school grounds by incorporating marketing-related guidelines into district-required school wellness policies.²⁹ Only 10% of districts now address marketing in their wellness policies.³⁰ The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) can also incorporate marketing-related actions into its HealthierUS School Challenge certification initiative.³¹

The USDA recently established strong nutrition standards for snack foods and beverages available in schools.³² Forthcoming implementation will go a long way to improve the school nutrition environment, but the USDA regulation does not address food marketing. As a result, marketing for products that are not permitted to be sold on school grounds could remain. The USDA has taken an important step, but further action is required to prevent students' exposure to in-school marketing messages that promote unhealthy diets. Policy makers, school district leaders, and parents should take action to ensure that the entire food and nutrition environment in schools promotes students' health and well-being. School property should be a place where messages to young people strengthen their bodies as well as their minds.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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