

Connecticut, New Jersey to Legislate Obesity Away?

By ACSH Staff — May 27, 2005

On May 18, the Connecticut House of Representatives followed the lead of the state Senate by passing legislation supposedly designed to reduce the prevalence of obesity in children.(1) This goal was to be accomplished by limiting students' access to so-called junk foods in school vending machines. The new bill would allow high school students continued access to diet sodas and some sports drinks but forbid regular sodas and various snack foods.

In passing this bill, Connecticut legislators followed on the heels of a number of other states. California, Texas, Arizona, Hawaii, and Louisiana, to name just a few, have either enacted or are planning to enact similar bills. And more recently, a panel of the New Jersey Senate approved a similar ban. (2)

Such legislation probably makes the legislators feel good -- makes them feel they're doing their bit to fight the epidemic of obesity currently affecting the nation's youngsters (according to government research, 16% of six- to nineteen-year-old Americans are now considered overweight -- a figure that has tripled since 1980). (3) Are any of these moves to restrict students' choices likely to do any good? Well, yes and no.

Certainly, from a strictly nutritional perspective, it's better for kids to drink milk or some fruit juices than a soft drink. Similarly, a piece of fruit or container of yogurt is nutritionally superior to chips or cookies. But if it's obesity we're trying to cope with, then a diet soft drink is better than any juice or milk-based beverage because the diet drink has no calories.

Legislators who pass these restrictive laws must assume that doing so will change students' food choices, lower their calorie intake, and therefore help in the war on obesity. But these much-desired results are far from being proven consequences of limiting students' choices.

This brings up yet another point: if legislators pass such "feel-good" laws, they should also be willing to address the issue of outcomes. In order to know whether implementation of these laws really decreases the prevalence of childhood obesity, legislators should also be mandating collection of information about their effects. At a minimum, students' body weights should be monitored so that the impact of changes in food types and availability can be assessed.

The prevalence of overweight and obesity in Americans -- adults and children -- is a lifestyle issue. It won't be reduced simply by legislation to keep students from snacking on "junk food" during school hours.

(1) Cowan AL. Hartford House votes to limit school junk food sales. The New York Times, May 19, 2005. p. B3.

(2) AP. N.J. Schools may stop selling junk food. The New York Times, May 24, 2005.

(3) <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/> ^[1]

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