New California Laws Won't Stem Tide of Childhood Obesity

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Kudos to Gov. Schwarzenegger, and state senators Escutia and Maldonado, who obviously are concerned about the epidemic of childhood obesity in California and who are trying to decrease its prevalence via legislation. But will the laws authored by the senators and signed by the governor (SBs 12, 281, and 965) really help? It's doubtful.

Not one of the bills addresses the elephant in the room -- consumption of excess calories. Instead, all three focus on improving the nutritional quality of kids' diets -- a laudable goal but not one that will whittle the problem (or anyone's waistline) down to size. SB12 sets food nutrition standards, SB 281 implements the inclusion of more fruits and vegetables into school meal programs, and SB 965 bans soda sales (even diet sodas) in high schools (they are currently banned in elementary and middle schools). This last bill still allows the sale of milk products, juice-based products, water, and electrolyte drinks (such as sports drinks) to continue. And that's the problem.

Although juice and "juice-based" drinks are perceived by many to be more healthful than sodas, that's not necessarily true. Take apple juice, for example. Twelve ounces of apple juice contain nearly 160 calories (more than a regular twelve-ounce Coke or Pepsi), most of it present as sugars. Apple juice contains minimal amounts of any vitamins or minerals, unless they're added by the producer. On the other hand, a diet soda, while also nutrient-poor, contains few if any, calories. Which is more likely to help with excess calorie intake? Not the apple juice.

While these bills make for positive media coverage, they do not address the real issues involved in dealing with childhood obesity. They do not, for example, help schools implement physical education programs or provide basic nutrition education so that students can learn how to make appropriate food selections for themselves.

The governor and senators may well feel good about addressing the childhood obesity issue, but they shouldn't kid themselves or us -- these bills won't help solve the problem.

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