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METRO DETROIT

EXPPELLING POP FROM SCHOOL: Sugary soda could vanish by 2009

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**BY PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI
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Shreekari Tadepalli, a fifth-grader at Hill Elementary School in Troy, knows how kids adore sugary sweet soda pop and is well aware of how enticing it can be.



zoom

"It's a very big problem," Shreekari, 10, said. She said her classmates "like it so much, they don't drink water, they don't drink juice, they don't drink milk. They only drink pop."

Hill Elementary in Troy already offers healthier options. Second-graders Addison Zhou, left, Niyaz Uddin, center, and Massimo Barczys had a choice of milk or juice with lunch Wednesday. Beverage distributors agreed to stop sales of some pop to public schools by 2009. (PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press)

Someday, that may not be an option for most students -- at least while they're in school. On Wednesday, the nation's largest beverage distributors agreed to stop nearly all sales of the most-sugary, most-fattening soft drinks to public schools by 2009 in an effort to combat childhood obesity. The deal will take effect provided local schools agree.

It's a shift that most hope will bring change in a nation where the number of overweight children has skyrocketed in recent years. In Michigan, 12% of high school students are overweight, and 15% are at risk of becoming overweight, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in a 2003 study.

Pop isn't the only culprit in childhood obesity, but health experts hailed the agreement as a good start to fighting the problem.

"This is a very powerful step," said Dr. Hank Rosman, a

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WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE OFFERED

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation announced Wednesday that the organizations that distribute most of the soft drinks in schools nationwide -- the American Beverage Association, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola and Cadbury Schweppes -- have adopted its beverage guidelines. A goal has been set to have these guidelines in place in all schools by the 2009-10 school year.

Here's what schools will get under the guidelines:

Elementary schools

Bottled water.

Servings up to 8 oz. of 100% fruit juice with no added sweeteners.

Servings of up to 8 oz. of low-fat and non-fat white and flavored milk.

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cardiologist at St. John Hospital and Medical Center in Detroit and president of the metro Detroit chapter of the American Heart Association. "You can't solve a problem until you first dive into it, and this does seem like a terrific start."

Under the agreement, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Cadbury Schweppes and the American Beverage Association -- which distribute about 87% of sodas to schools -- will sell only water, unsweetened juice and low-fat milk to elementary and middle schools. Diet sodas and sports drinks would be sold only to high schools.

But the deal -- announced by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a joint initiative of the William J. Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association -- won't affect many schools in Detroit that contract with Faygo Beverages, a company not aligned with the beverage association.

Faygo representatives did not return phone calls seeking comment Wednesday, and Detroit schools officials declined to comment.

School sales of sports drinks, diet sodas and bottled water have been rising in recent years, the beverage association reported, while purchases of sugary soft drinks have been falling.

Non-diet pop, at about 150 calories a can, is still the most popular drink, making up 45% of all drinks sold in schools.

Even though many schools are likely to embrace the plan to stop most sales of sugary soft drinks, students said Wednesday that keeping pop out of school vending machines won't stop kids from drinking it.

Anthony Bryant, 17, a junior and student body president at Central High School in Detroit, said his school day wouldn't be the same without the morning jolt he gets from a bottle of Sprite.

But if he couldn't get it from a vending machine in school, he

non-fat white and flavored milk.

Middle schools

The same beverages as elementary schools, but in 10 oz. servings

High schools

Bottled water.

Diet soda.

Up to 12 oz. servings of low-fat and non-fat white and flavored milk.

100% juice with no added sweeteners.

Light juice and sports drinks.

Also, at least 50% of the beverages provided must be water and no-calorie or low-calorie options.

The agreement pertains to beverages sold on school grounds during and after school, but not to sporting events.

Source: William J. Clinton Foundation

EASY WAYS TO MAKE HEALTHY CHANGES

Small changes can make a big difference in a child's snacking habits. Here are some tips from Catherine Durocher, supervisor for Food and Nutrition Services at L'Anse Creuse Public Schools:

Let kids help cook and shop with you for fresh fruits and vegetables and tell them why these foods are important.

Continually expose children to new, healthy food.

Leave a bowl of fruit out. Make it visible and easy to get at, in child-size bits. Teenagers will eat whatever is easy and quick.

Teach kids to eat according to colors. Dark greens, bright orange, yellow fruit and vegetables are healthy.

Try to get kids to eat five to nine servings of fruit and vegetables a day.

Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki

WHAT KIDS AND ADULTS HAD TO SAY

"Sugar is just legal crack for kids. They need to drink some clear, fresh water."

vending machine in school, he said, he'd buy it someplace else.

He's got another reason for wanting to keep pop in schools: The vending machine sales help pay for things such as dances and after-school programs. "If they took the pop out of the schools, we'd be broke," Anthony said. "We need that funding."

Though the agreement would not mean the end of the contracts schools have with beverage companies, it could reduce the amount of money those deals generate for schools, said Patricia Brand, assistant superintendent for business services in Plymouth-Canton Community Schools. That school district has a deal with Coca-Cola that generates about \$100,000 a year.

"It supplements the athletic programs, art, debate, because we haven't had the appropriate funding to manage those programs the way they should be," Brand said.

But at Armada Middle School, which two years ago replaced pop with water in vending machines and at athletic events, the dip in revenues was only temporary. Profits initially fell about 20%, but after a while, the kids started drinking water instead, said Principal Bill Zebelian.

"If they're thirsty and want something to drink, they'll drink water," Zebelian said.

Shiron Ghebre, a teacher at Central High School in Detroit.

"Pop is definitely a problem. It's just not really good for your health.... I barely have it once a month."

Cameron Snyder-Pitts, 10, a fifth-grader at Hill Elementary School in Troy.

"I'd say it's actually very good for students to be able to have healthy foods."

Libbe DeWitt, 11, a fifth-grader at Tenniswood Elementary in Clinton Township, which is adding a fruit and vegetable bar in its cafeteria.

"There's just so much pressure to eat junk food."

Teri Singleton of Detroit, who has a 14-year-old son.

"I'm an athlete, and I don't need to drink pop. Plus, it gives me acne. ... But if they're there, I'll drink it."

Sharnice Miles, 16, a junior at Central High, on pop machines

"It's long past time ... to enforce its current rules regarding the sale of food of minimal nutritional value in schools and for Congress to strengthen them so that ... schools provide good nutrition to children."

Gary Ruskin, of Commercial Alert, which advocates for public health.

Giving students healthier alternatives is part of a trend that many schools in metro Detroit are encouraging. At Tenniswood Elementary in Clinton Township, for example, a fruit and vegetable bar is set to open next week as part of the school lunch option.

"I really don't believe if it's healthy they won't eat it," said Catherine Durocher, food and nutrition supervisor for the school district. "I think it's what they're exposed to, and if we expose them to it, they will try it."

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