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Obesity Crisis or

Soda Scapegoat?

The Debate Over Selling Soda in Schools

B E R K E L E Y M E D I A S T U D I E S G R O U P



Obesity Crisis or Soda Scapegoat? The Debate Over Selling Soda in Schools

In 1999 a Venice High School student asked a simple question that changed business practices in California's largest school district. She wanted to know: can the school sell 100% fruit juice in its vending machines? Her health teacher took the question to the school's financial manager, who, to her surprise, said no. Venice High School could not sell fruit juice because it would conflict with the school's soda contract. From that moment, the fight was on.¹ On August 22, 2002, the Los Angeles school board voted to ban soda sales in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Similar fights were underway elsewhere where students, parents, teachers, and health personnel were concerned about the growing tide of overweight and obesity. In California the year before, on December 12, 2001, the Oakland Unified School District passed a nutrition policy that included a ban on soda sales on school campuses. The Oakland and Los Angeles actions received widespread news coverage, and were among the events that reporters began to characterize as "a culture war for the new century."²

The news coverage of the California school soda sales bans offers the opportunity to systematically analyze the public debate on this public health issue. Genuine concern about students' health and well-being motivates supporters of the soda bans. But they are met by fierce opposition from school administrators who don't want to lose revenue and soda companies who don't want to lose their foothold with a burgeoning market. We wanted to learn from the news coverage how each side of this debate characterizes its position. How were the Oakland and Los Angeles Unified School Districts' soda sales bans portrayed in the news? Were the school board actions heralded or dismissed? Who was quoted in the news coverage, and what did they say?

¹ Domac, Jacqueline. *Selling out our children's health: How to untangle sound policy from corporate influence*. American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, November 8, 2004, Washington, DC.

² Timothy Egan. "In bid to improve nutrition, schools expel soda and chips," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2002, page A1.

Why study the news?

Every day, there are thousands of stories waiting to be told. Some of these may directly affect our lives and those of people we know, while other stories may shed light on aspects of life that we may never have considered. It would be impossible to cover all stories each day — journalists must choose what stories to cover. In selecting one story over another, journalists whittle down the thousands of possible stories into the dozens that will be brought to our attention and then become topics of public conversation and policy debate.

After deciding which stories to cover, reporters and editors also make choices about how to tell the story. Reporters consider whom to quote, what facts to use, what metaphors enhance storytelling, what pictures and visual images are best, what to leave in and what to leave out. These decisions shape the story, and consequently, our understanding of the issue. Journalists' choices legitimate certain people and viewpoints; elements included in the story are more credible than those that are excluded.

Journalists' selection process is known as news framing. Like a frame around a painting, the news frame draws attention to a specific picture and separates told from untold pieces of the story. Elements in the story are said to be in the frame; elements left out of the story are outside the frame. Frames are boundaries around a news story delineating what is and is not news.

Frames are powerful because they foster certain interpretations and hinder others — often without the news consumer's awareness. Frames are central arguments or perspectives on a news story that shape the perspective of the news audience on the issue. A frame does this by providing cues that activate a scenario in the minds of the audience. Frames create tracks for a train of thought and once on that track it's hard to get off.

What We Did

To determine how the California soda sales bans were framed, we analyzed the content of selected news media from January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2002. This sample allowed us to examine the framing both before and after passage of the soda sales bans in both Oakland and Los Angeles. To gather the sample of articles, we conducted a key word search in the Lexis-Nexis database using the search terms “soda and Oakland Unified School District” and “soda and Los Angeles Unified School District.”

The search returned 84 news and opinion pieces: 42 news articles, 30 opinion pieces (editorials, op-eds, columns and letters to the editor), eight articles from trade publications such as *Nation's Restaurant News*, three television transcripts, and one radio transcript.

To determine how the pieces were framed, we first read a small number of the stories to generate preliminary categories. Using these categories we coded the remaining pieces, discussed our findings, and subsequently revised the coding scheme to resolve differences and refine our initial categories. A third coder and one author then recoded the entire sample.

The Framing Battle: From Obesity Crisis to Soda Scapegoat

We found 13 frames that fall into three general areas: frames supporting the soda sales bans, frames opposing the bans, and frames that were critical of the bans.

Frames Supporting the Soda Bans

The frames supporting the bans centered around health, moral values, and feasibility. Supporters used these frames to indicate why the soda sales bans were necessary and why they would work.

Obesity threatens health [103³]

Capturing the concern over the detrimental effects of obesity on health and the concern over the rapid rise in obesity rates among children and adults, this frame was used most frequently to justify the sales ban. When invoking this frame, speakers emphasized the local and national statistics on the rise in obesity and diabetes among children, and provided a list of the ailments associated with increased weight gain. This frame sounds the alarm emphasizing that overweight and obesity is a real problem that requires immediate, serious action.

School responsibility [52]

This was the most powerful moral argument for banning soda sales. Those invoking this frame asserted that schools have a responsibility to do the right thing for children. Implicit in this claim is that sodas and other “junk food” offerings were not in students’ best interests. The proponents of this frame were challenging the status quo and reclaiming the school’s moral authority as the institution entrusted with the duty to educate students in the broadest sense: to prepare them to be healthy, contributing citizens of society.

³ The numbers for the frames are based on how many mentions each frame received in the entire sample. A frame may have received several mentions in one story, and not appeared in others. This is the total number of times the frame was invoked.

Health before profit [29]

This frame combined the appeals to moral duty and protecting health. Proponents of this frame explicitly acknowledged that soda sales provided funds for resource-deprived schools, but insisted that in spite of the need, a school's priority should be the health of the students in its care. Proponents made clear that there is no appropriate balance between generating school revenue and exploiting children's desire for nutrient-deficient foods. They argued that the school should in no way endorse unhealthy diets that can harm children's health.

Healthier alternatives [17]

This frame serves to counter the argument of those who believe children have an innate predisposition to "junk" foods and will choose nothing else. Proponents of this frame make clear that children will eat what is available — if the vending machines are stocked with healthy drinks, students will drink them. To allay the fears of large reductions in school revenues, proponents highlighted evidence from individual test schools where sales of water and healthier beverages had outpaced that of soda.

Better nutrition, better learning [15]

This powerful frame connects student health with school achievement. If children are well-nourished, proponents argue, their minds and bodies will be better prepared to be successful in school. One or two speakers linked better nutritional choices offered in schools to improved performance on the standardized achievement tests that have become key to measuring student and school achievement.

Pennies from their pockets [6]

Supporters of this frame make clear that schools' reliance on the revenues generated from student purchases of sodas on campus is inappropriate for both the students and the schools. While the lack of adequate funding for schools is a fact, it is not the responsibility of students to pay for their education by purchasing sodas and other commercial products from their schools — particularly when those products are not good for health. The unspoken yet implicit root of this frame is that society provides public education for children because it is in everyone's best interest to have an educated citizenry. It is not a pay-as-you go system, it is meant to be available to everyone.

*If children are well-nourished,
proponents argue, their minds and
bodies will be better prepared to be
successful in school.*

Frames in Opposition

Opponents of the soda sales bans consolidated their arguments around money and the role of government.

Soda sales provide money [115]

This frame was repeated more than any other in the sample, most often by school principals who would detail the amount of revenue generated by the soda sales, what programs (sports and proms) these funds supported, and the dire consequences that would result from the loss of revenue. Most schools indicated that they used the funds for “extras” such as students’ clubs, sports, proms, field trips, and other extra-curricular activities. In some schools, the funds paid for school basics, like textbooks. The bottom line for these opponents is that banning the sale of sodas on campus will mean hardship for the schools and cuts in activities, by implication harming the school environment and the students. In an ironic twist, some speakers used this frame to say that a ban on soda sales would result in poorer student health because the soda revenues funded sports which keep kids healthy and prevent obesity.

Nanny state/slippery slope [15]

Proponents of this frame indicated that by taking action to ban soda sales, schools, which represent government, are once again trying to tell people what to do. The frame implies that parents and students are not able to make responsible choices for themselves, and therefore the schools are making the choices for them. Coupled with this resentment against what they see as unnecessary “nannying” by the school board is a fear that schools will not stop at restricting soda sales. Proponents of this frame worry that the school board’s zeal to baby the students will result in further bans on the sales of chips, pizza and other food items. The soda sales ban, they argue, is a slippery slope down a path toward other bans.

Unfair to restrict choice [14]

This frame was typically invoked by students who felt that a ban on soda sales was unjust because it infringed on their right as individuals to make their own choices about what they do and do not eat or drink. Parents and school officials insisted that teenagers are old enough to be responsible for their food choices. The underlying value is individual choice and self-determination.

Soda as scapegoat [13]

Spokespeople from the soft drink industry, the grocery industry, and a sprinkling of others insisted that sodas were being blamed for a larger problem than should be laid at their feet. Soda companies said it was unfair to blame them since they have been partners with schools over the years. They asserted that the school districts were picking on soda so it would look like they were dealing with the problem of overweight and obesity in children.

Critical Frames

Framing analyses of the public debate around a policy decision generally reveal three types of frames: those for the policy, those against, and those that are neutral, describing characteristics of the locality or the issue that make the story unique and newsworthy. The soda sales ban, to our surprise, revealed an additional unique set of frames that hovered in the spectrum between support and opposition. These frames we have named critical frames, as they ultimately came down in opposition to the bans, even though they were often said by supporters.

These frames were unexpected and troubling, from a public health perspective, because they ultimately argue against the soda bans. While that was the goal of some who used them, it is likely that supporters of the bans who evoked these frames did not intentionally set out to undercut the value of the soda sales bans.

The critical frames hovered around two themes: reducing obesity will require many different actions and doubts about the feasibility of soda bans.

Obesity is complicated [57]

This set of related frames indicated support, and even at times admiration for the school boards' action to ban soda sales, but enumerated a host of reasons for why this particular action was insufficient. There were those who stated that the soda sales ban was just a first "baby step" against obesity. Some singled out school menus as the obesity culprit, while others insisted that physical activity was the critical component to preventing overweight in children. The complicated nature of the issue of overweight and obesity and the concomitant need for change in one's "lifestyle" were invoked by yet others. Nutrition education was also seen as a critical factor for solving this problem: "...simply removing certain items from schools does nothing to educate children on the importance of a balanced diet and physical activity."⁴ Together these frames simultaneously applaud the action of the school boards to ban soda sales and undermine it by pointing out how it is insufficient.

It won't work [56]

This frame differs from the one above in that it provided little support for the action to ban soda sales. The ban was dismissed as "pie-in-the sky,"⁵ in other words, futile both in dealing with the epidemic and in implementation. Spokespeople used this frame to say that the sales ban won't make a difference and the school board is out-of-touch with how things work. They say teens' soda-drinking behavior can't be changed and school "culture and practice"⁶ cannot be adjusted so radically in a short period. The most popular manifestation of this frame was the insistence by students and adults alike that students will find other ways to get their hands on soda, and therefore the campus sales ban will accomplish little or nothing.

⁴ "Stop the pop? L.A. school district votes to ban soft drinks from public schools," *Current Events*, September 27, 2002.

⁵ Alex Katz. "School board will ban sweets; New rule bars campus candy sales," *The Oakland Tribune*, December 14, 2001.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Summary of Frames in News Coverage of School Soda Sales Bans in California, 2001–2002

	Package	Core frame	Core position	Metaphor	Catch-phrase
Supporting	Obesity threatens health	Children's health and well-being are at risk as rates of obesity increase.	Serious action to stem the tide of this epidemic is warranted.	Obesity is a plague, rapidly spreading across the US.	"Obesity is the fastest-growing disease we have and it costs the county an estimated \$3 billion a year, but it is something that is entirely preventable." ^a
	School responsibility	Schools should lead by example; banning soda sales is the right thing to do.	Schools have a duty to keep children safe and not expose them to harmful products.	Schools are protectors and role models.	"Even if we can't change a single kid's behavior, the message we send by having all these deals with junk food peddlers is that this stuff is O.K." ^b
	Health before profit	Children's health is more important than school revenues.	Even though schools need funds, children's health must take precedence.	Scales tip toward health.	"If I do lose a little [revenue], and you are talking about making kids healthier, there is no question in my mind which direction to go." ^c
	Healthier alternatives	Kids will buy what is available to them; therefore, healthy will work.	Children like drinks/food that is good for them and will purchase it if they have the opportunity.	Out of the mouths of babes.	"The students seem to prefer water and juice over soda. In fact, water is our biggest seller." ^d
	Better nutrition, better learning	School achievement is connected to a child's diet.	The minds and bodies of well-nourished children will be successful in school.	Machinery needs the proper fuel. Tools for success.	"We will encourage more children to eat a nutritious breakfast and lunch. As a result they will be better prepared to do a better job in school." ^e
	Pennies from their pockets	Schools should not depend on soda sales.	Children should not have to subsidize their education.	Pocket change.	"It's never been the responsibility of our students to subsidize their public education with their pocket change." ^f
Critical	Obesity is complicated	Obesity results from many factors; more than soda sales need to be addressed to make a difference.	Taking action to fight obesity is laudable, but banning soda sales is not enough.	"Band-aid." ^g	"a first baby step" ^h "a drop in the bucket" ⁱ "This is about the couch, not the can." ^j
	It won't work	Kids will get soda elsewhere.	Banning soda sales will not work, and therefore will do nothing to counter obesity in kids.	Wishful thinking.	"It's not that hard to buy soda, and if you tell a teenager not to do something, they strive that much harder to do it." ^k
	Addicted to soda	Addiction trumps laws.	The sales ban on campus will not stop students from getting the soda they want.	"daily sugar fixes" ^l "crash" ^m schools as suppliers to students' soda habit	"You know adults get their coffee in the morning. Kids have soda. That's their kick." ⁿ "I drink five to 10 Cokes a day." ^o
Opposing	Soda sales provide money	Schools depend on the money from soda sales.	Funds from soda sales support extracurricular activities that enrich student life.	Suffering schools.	"The problem at the high school level is without the sale of soft drinks, we cannot support our athletic programs." ^p
	Nanny state / slippery slope	Parents and kids can decide what to drink and do not need school directives.	Schools are overreaching by not letting students make responsible decisions for themselves.	Schools as nannies.	"By banning soda, the board has deemed itself wiser and more caring than the poor, uneducated, unwashed slobs who deposit their children in their care." ^q
	Unfair to restrict choice	Students' right to make their own choice is being restricted.	Kids can be responsible for themselves and what they eat and drink.	Schools are a dictatorship.	"It's a choice. That's what freedom is – the freedom to be obese if you want to." ^r
	Soda as scapegoat	Soda is being unfairly singled out for blame.	Soda is not responsible for the obesity epidemic.	Scapegoat. Biting the hand that feeds you.	"Unfortunately, it is impossible to pick a 'poster child' for the obesity problem as they have attempted to do." ^s

^a Helen Gao. "LAUSD bans soft drink sales; move could spark national trend," *Pasadena Star-News*, August 27, 2002.

^b Timothy Egan. "In bid to improve nutrition, schools expel soda and chips," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2002, page A1.

^c Gao, op cit.

^d Karen Robes. "Area students feel change wouldn't help to curb obesity," *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, August 28, 2002.

^e Karen Rubin. "Breaking the junk food cycle; Schools deal with epidemic of overweight children," *Pasadena Star-News*, August 31, 2002.

^f Cara Mia Dimassa and Erika Hayasaki. "L.A. schools set to can soda sales," *Los Angeles Times*, August 25, 2002, page A1.

^g Helen Gao. "Soda ban at Los Angeles school district may burst bubble," *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, August 26, 2002.

^h Benedict Carey. "Soda ban; A drop in the bucket; nutrition experts laud the L.A. school district's decision but say it won't prevent obesity," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2002.

ⁱ *Ibid.*

Depictions/Visual Images	Roots	Consequences	Values
Overweight kids and adults.	Public health actions are warranted to prevent disease.	Increased rates of diabetes and other ailments; increased health care costs over time.	Healthy population, thriving society. Protection and prevention. Life.
Educators as leaders, taking charge of their schools.	Schools have a legal and civic responsibility to educate students and produce good citizens.	Well-educated citizenry.	Nurturing and protecting children; duty to children. Stewardship.
Resisting temptation.	Schools exist to serve children and society, not to be profit centers.	Children's health is a priority in school policy decisions.	Prioritizing the needs of children; caretaking.
Kids eating healthy foods.	Children are adaptable; children learn when adults teach.	Water in every child's hand; the school makes even more money.	Wholesomeness.
Alert, enthusiastic students. A classroom with every students' hands up.	Mind and body are connected; a healthy body means a fertile mind.	School achievement tests go up, everybody benefits.	Educational success.
Children lining up at the vending machine.	Public education means public funding, not pay-as-you go.	Schools find other sources of revenue.	Civic duty.
Finger in the dike.	This is a health problem that goes far beyond the confines of the school grounds.	Epidemic among children will continue even if soda is banned.	All or nothing; cynicism.
Kids as determined and resourceful; educators as naïve dreamers.	Schools acquiescing to students.	Students streaming off campus in droves to buy soda.	Power of youth.
Addict. Huge portion sizes.	Primacy of instant gratification.	A nation of children with food and soda dependence.	Self-medication. Reliance on the quick fix.
Principals concerned about money.	Schools already struggling to provide the basics. Schools have always had to raise funds for extracurricular activities.	Sports, dances and clubs will be cut if schools lose revenue from soda sales ban.	Pragmatism and self-interest. Well-rounded education.
School board members and educators as know-it-all elitists.	Minimal role for government.	Schools will keep making decisions for the individual students; possibly banning more and more foods as time goes on.	Personal responsibility.
Educators as inflexible, students as victims.	Rights of individuals to do as they please if it does not harm others.	Students will rebel.	Freedom of choice.
Politicians trying to come up with a quick fix to calm constituents.	Soda companies have been school supporters; how can they be blamed?	The soda industry will suffer.	Free enterprise. Market forces.

^j Dimassa and Hayasaki, op cit.

^k Nicholas Grudin. "GUSD takes hard look at soda sales," *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, September 25, 2002, page 3.

^l Alex Katz. "School board will ban sweets; new rule bars campus candy sales," *The Oakland Tribune*, December 14, 2001.

^m Egan, op cit.

ⁿ Gao, *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, op cit.

^o Shannon Darling. "Sodas in schools," *Visalia Times-Delta*, September 19, 2002, page A1.

^p Gao, *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, op cit.

^q Donald Lais. "School district ban: Do sodas and education mix?" *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 2002.

^r Judy Herbst. "A healthful education doesn't include soda," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2002, page B16.

^s "L.A. schools close the book on soda; Soft drink ban may signal new opportunities for milk processors," *Dairy Field*,

Addicted to soda [15]

This frame is a special case of the preceding frame — soda sales bans won't work, proponents of this frame argued, because students are addicted to soda. Students were depicted as willing to do whatever it takes to make sure they get their daily "sugar fixes."⁷ Teachers noticed that after consuming soda, students are agitated, and later "crash"⁸ and are inattentive in class. The schools themselves are characterized as suppliers to the students, encouraging and profiting from the students' soda habit.

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⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Egan, op cit.

Frames in the Background

While most of the frames in the soda debates centered on the conflict over what was *in* the vending machines, in a few instances the acceptance of commercialism in schools was openly questioned. Students spend the bulk of their time at school, and are therefore a captive audience. A few articles argued that the presence of vending machines and branded sponsorships in the schools create an environment that condones commercialism and ultimately benefits the participating companies by creating lifelong consumers of certain brands more than it benefits students. This frame challenged the morality of schools that allow students to be taken advantage of in this manner.

The role of parents in teaching their children about proper nutrition was also raised a few times. This was essentially a critical frame, with proponents stating that it is the job of parents, not schools, to take responsibility for child nutrition.

A similar critical frame argued that health education was the key to solving the obesity epidemic. Like most critical frames, both proponents and opponents of the sales ban evoked this frame. While the previous frame insisted that nutrition education was a parental responsibility, this frame purports that if schools were going to take any action to address overweight and obesity among students, the action should be more nutrition education.

Ultimately both nutrition education frames place the responsibility on the individual student for his or her own health choices. These frames argue that whether students learn about nutrition at home or at school, armed with this knowledge they can be responsible for their own weight and so avoid obesity. While it is true that each person controls what actually goes into his or her mouth, this perspective sidesteps the important role that the external physical, cultural, social, and commercial environments play in affecting personal decisions.

Who Was Speaking?

The spokespeople quoted in the articles were primarily school board members and students, followed by representatives from the soda, grocery, and vending industries (see Table 1). Reporters asked principals for their reaction to the soda sales ban, and most principals along with school superintendents focused their comments on how the sales bans will affect schools' revenues. They were by far the most prominent speakers when it came to the *Soda Sales Provide Money* frame.

Los Angeles Unified School District board members emphasized *School Responsibility*; it was the focus of their arguments both before the sales ban passed and also in defense of it. Not surprisingly, physicians, dieticians, nutritionists and other health professionals were most often called on to articulate the threat that the obesity epidemic poses to health.

Industry representatives repeatedly emphasized the *Obesity is Complicated* frame, attempting to shift the focus away from a ban on soda sales and direct attention to more individually-focused interventions.

Table 1
Sources Quoted in News Coverage of
School Soda Bans in California, 2001-2002

School board members	45
Students	44
Industry representatives	35
Principals	22
Health professionals/academics	21
Superintendents/school administrators	20
Teachers/food service personnel	17
Advocates	9
Person on the street	4
Other elected officials	2

Lessons and Recommendations for Advocates

Although it has been more than a year since the two California school districts acted to ban soda sales in their schools, this is a story that continues to evolve, both in California and throughout the United States. In the wake of the actions by the Oakland and Los Angeles school boards, other districts across the country began rethinking the relationship between schools and soda companies. This story will continue to unfold as more school districts consider limiting access to soda and junk food to address obesity, and as the evidence accumulates regarding the effects of the school soda bans on student health and school revenue. Public health advocates can use the lessons learned here to continue the public debate on this issue.

A key lesson from the analysis of the debate so far is that when public health advocates discuss the broad implications of obesity they may dilute their arguments supporting soda bans. Everyone would acknowledge that soda bans alone won't stem the tide of obesity among young people. Yet if advocates believe banning soda in schools is an important piece of solving the obesity puzzle, they can strengthen their efforts by staying focused on that piece. In particular, advocates should:

Be strategic, not comprehensive.

Say what the policy will achieve, do not focus on its limitations. Advocates in the field know a lot about the epidemic of overweight and obesity, and know that long-term solutions to this problem will require comprehensive changes in the broad social, cultural, and structural environments. Still, it's not necessary to elucidate the complexity of this task in every interaction with the news media. Instead, advocates can note that remedying obesity will be a long struggle with many small victories over time, and highlight the progress being made with each achievement, including soda bans. Public health advocates who support soda bans in schools should state simply and clearly why they do. Those who state they approve of the ban, but in the next breath mention everything else that needs to be done to *really* make a difference on this problem end up communicating a similar message as those opposed to the soda sales ban: soda is just a small part of the problem and is receiving inappropriate attention.

Know your opposition and anticipate what they will say.

Based on the debate so far, the primary argument against changing the vending offerings in schools is the fear of lost revenue. Everyone can acknowledge that schools need money to do their job, but advocates need to make the case that it is not acceptable to exploit students' penchant for sweet drinks as an alternative to tougher policy decisions about school revenues. As one advocate said, "Some people oppose a ban on sweets in schools because of the loss of funds they generate, but they would not support the sale of cigarettes on campuses no matter how much money it brought into the schools."⁹ This quote powerfully captures the idea that the aim is to protect student health above all other goals, revenue generation included. The debate over soda in schools can also open the door to the larger social issue of how we, as a society, should be sure our public schools are adequately funded.

⁹ Nancy J. Hill. "Nutritional policies," *The Oakland Tribune*, December 26, 2001.

Position yourself to respond to and to create news.

Be ready to respond to news in your local community around soda sales bans. Spokespeople need practice, whether testifying before school boards or speaking to reporters. Create opportunities for advocates to practice speaking and listening to each other about their support for the soda sales ban. Take advantage of the controversy the soda bans generate to make the case for the school's responsibility to protect students' health. Emphasize the appeal to the value of protecting children's health, and the importance of fueling children's school achievement with nourishing food and drink that strengthens and prepares their minds and bodies for learning.

Recommendations for Journalists

Journalists have an important role to play in this developing story. As the epidemic of overweight and obesity continues to grow, journalists will communicate to the public what is at stake and how it affects society as a whole. Journalists can look beyond the story of the fight over money from vending machines to uncover the roots of both the funding crisis in schools and how it came to be that commercial interests and schools became so intertwined. This was not always the case — journalists can ask, why here? Why now? And, what can be done?

Investigate why schools are so strapped for cash.

The argument is repeatedly made that schools depend on the money generated from the sale of sodas to fund needed school programs. Yet, in the stories we analyzed, rarely is the underlying question asked: Why don't schools have the money they need for basic supplies and activities? What are the current school funding mechanisms? Is it a problem of taxation, of revenue distribution, or mismanagement? Journalists can use the controversy over banning sodas in schools to uncover the roots of schools' funding problems. Many schools have historically fundraised for extra-curricular activities — how many schools are now lacking the funds for basics?

Investigate soda contracts: Who profits?

The standard response is that schools benefit from the soda sales, and that industry is gaining little, and performing an important service in helping out the schools. But how much of the revenue generated actually goes to fund the activities for students? If soda companies are not making a profit on their investment in schools, what are some of the other reasons they want to be there? What sort of intangible benefits may they be reaping? How much do soda companies value the brand loyalty established with school children? How does that value figure on the company's tally sheet?

Conclusion

The Oakland and Los Angeles Unified School Districts' actions to ban soda sales on their respective campuses signaled a challenge to business as usual. The bans have revealed to the surprise of many the prevalence of commercial interests in school environments. In the constant push and pull between individual and environmental policies to counter the growing prevalence of overweight and obesity, these school boards saw the need to change the environment in order to have an impact on individual behavior. These policies also provide an opportunity to examine school funding policies and the broader societal goals of public education and our commitment to and investment in it.

This story will continue to unfold over the months and years to come. Public health advocates and journalists both have a role to play in helping the public and policymakers understand what is at stake and what, together, we should do about it.



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