

NEWS RELEASE

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Coalition Wants Schools to Stop Pushing Junk Food on Children

To reduce childhood obesity, Commercial Alert, child advocates, public health professionals, food safety groups and media scholars today asked key Members of Congress to get the public schools to stop promoting junk food to schoolchildren.

The letter to Senate and House Agriculture Committee Chairmen Richard Lugar (R-IN) and Larry Combest, (R-TX) and Ranking Members Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Charles Stenholm (D-TX) says that in thousands of schools “corporations and school administrators have joined together to market high-calorie, caffeinated, high-sugar candy and soda pop to impressionable children,” which contradicts the purposes of the National School Lunch Program. The letter follows.

Dear Chairmen Lugar and Combest, and Ranking Members Harkin and Stenholm:

When he signed the National School Lunch Act into law in 1946, Harry Truman said that “no nation is any healthier than its children.” Later that year, Truman expanded on this theme. “The well nourished school child is a better student,” Truman said. “He is healthier and more alert. He is developing good food habits which will benefit him for the rest of his life. In short, he is a better asset for his country in every way.”

Congress enacted the National School Lunch Act to achieve the goal that President Truman articulated so well. The Act established the National School Lunch Program “to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children.”

After extensive hearings, and reviews of statistical surveys of students, Congress concluded that children learn better on a healthy diet. In its report on the bill, the House Committee on Agriculture wrote: “The educational features of a properly chosen diet served at school should not be underemphasized. Not only is the child taught what a good diet consists of, but his parents and family likewise are indirectly instructed.” In its own report, the Senate Committee on Agriculture noted that “proper nutrition is essential for the health and well-being of a child and for his growth and development as a citizen.”

For decades, the School Lunch Program has served this nation well. It has provided tens of billions of healthful meals to the nation’s schoolchildren. In recent years, however, the goals of the School Lunch Program have come under increasing attack, and the culprits are the recipients of these federal dollars -- that is, the public schools.

In Fiscal Year 1999, schools happily accepted \$7.4 billion in taxpayer funds to carry out the federal school food programs. Yet thousands of those schools have openly defied the intent of the Senate and House Agriculture Committees, and Congress as a whole, in providing those dollars, by encouraging school children to eat junk food. In these schools, corporations and

school administrators have joined together to market high-calorie, caffeinated, high-sugar candy and soda pop to impressionable children.

Propaganda touting the consumption of junk food is now commonplace in the nation's schools. About 12,000 schools show Primedia's Channel One, an in-school marketing program disguised as a news show, which features a parade of ads for junk food and soda pop to a contractually obligated captive audience of about eight million school children. In recent months, Channel One has used the public classrooms to promote Snickers, Twix, M&M's, Pepsi, Hostess Cakes, Milky Way, Doritos, Mountain Dew, Nestle's Crunch, Skittles and others.

This propaganda campaign for bad nutrition is intensifying. Soda pop is an example. *Advertising Age* reported last year that "In the last 18 months alone, the number of exclusive soda contracts in school districts has increased nationwide 300%, to 150." According to Channel One's Teen Fact Book 2000, schools sell soda pop as their "top beverage product," and the top food products sold are potato chips, tortilla chips and cookies.

It is probably no accident that childhood obesity has become a major public health problem in the United States. An article in the October 27, 1999 issue of *the Journal of the American Medical Association* notes "alarming increases in obesity among children and adolescents," and an accompanying editorial remarks on the role of the "marketing of snack foods" in the obesity epidemic. In 1998, Surgeon General David Satcher observed that many young people in America today are "starting out obese and dooming themselves to the difficult task of overcoming a tough illness."

These young people will subject themselves and the whole society to enormous costs. One recent study estimates that the total annual cost of obesity in the United States is nearly \$100 billion, for diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, as well as extra visits to doctors, bed-rest and lost work days.

This is exactly the kind of result that Congress intended the School Lunch Program to avoid. It sought to promote healthful eating habits so that young Americans could grow up to be contributors to society, not medical burdens upon it. Yet that is what the public schools -- schools that accept millions of dollars in Lunch Program funds -- are promoting.

To its credit, Congress wisely reserved for itself full authority over the educational aspects of the Lunch Program. It specifically prevented the Secretary of Agriculture from getting involved in this area. In other words, the ball is in your court, and if you do not act now, the problem will likely grow worse. Of course, local school administrators can put commercial propaganda in their schools if they wish. That's for them to decide.

But it's for Congress to decide whether it will continue to lavish hundreds of millions of dollars in school lunch funds upon schools that are violating the very purpose for that program -- for money. School administrators shouldn't be allowed to have it both ways. They shouldn't be

able to take federal money for school lunches, and then take money or products from corporations to subvert the purposes of the lunch program.

Actions have consequences, and that applies as much to school administrators as to anyone else. If these people are not willing to abide by the purposes of the School Lunch Program -- that is, the “improvement of the health and well-being of the Nation’s youth”-- then perhaps they should pay for their own lunch program. Federal taxpayers deserve better, and so do the nation’s youth.

Sincerely,

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