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COMMENTARY

Hawai'i should ban junk food in schools

By Dr. J. David Curb

A few weeks ago, California's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed several bills that ban the sale of sodas in high schools and set fat, sugar and calorie standards for all foods, except cafeteria lunches, sold in public schools.

This bold step was opposed by some very powerful business interests, including the California Chamber of Commerce and the Grocery Manufacturers of America. I have no doubt it was also contested by supporters of public school athletic and band programs, which often depend on money from vending machine sales.

On the flip side, the governor was backed by educators and the medical community, who appreciate that state government can make a real difference in influencing our children's health.

Schwarzenegger is not alone in his concerns. Britain's education secretary, Ruth Kelly, recently announced plans to ban junk food from school cafeterias and to prohibit vending-machine sales of soft drinks.

The overriding concern of both Kelly and Schwarzenegger is that their constituencies are becoming increasingly obese. According to the Guardian newspaper, some 22 percent of the adult population in Britain is obese and 50 percent is overweight. Unless current trends are reversed, half of all British children could be obese by 2020. Likewise, in California obesity has reached epidemic proportions. In a recent survey, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy said 28 percent of California's children are overweight, and that in some communities, the rate tops 40 percent.

Schwarzenegger was quoted as saying that obesity leads directly to major medical problems that "rob our kids of a healthy childhood." Beyond that, childhood obesity does not go away with age and robs the same kids of years of healthy life as adults.

Hawai'i would do well to emulate these examples and ban the sale of sodas to our most vulnerable population — our children.

In many respects, the children of Hawai'i may be in greater danger than those of California. According to research conducted by the state, 10 to 60 percent of Hawai'i adults are obese, depending on ethnic group.

Pacific islanders are at highest risk. Research conducted at schools in Hawai'i showed that among fourth-graders, 20 percent were at risk for being overweight and 16 percent were overweight. Among high school youths, 19 percent were overweight and 18 percent were at risk for being overweight. A study conducted in Hawai'i in a community with a large representation of Pacific islanders found that the rate of overweight children, ages 6 to 19, was double that of the Mainland. For example, 25 percent of Hawai'i boys ages 6 to 11 are overweight, compared with only 12 percent of those on the Mainland. Similarly, approximately 22 percent of Hawaii girls ages 12 to 19 are overweight, compared with 9 percent of those on the Mainland.

This is an alarming trend.

Obesity spawns a number of chronic diseases. The major health threat, especially among Asians and Pacific islanders, is the early development of Type 2 diabetes (adult onset), particularly in youth who have a family history of the disease. This, in turn, is a major risk factor for heart attacks and strokes in those individuals. In Hawai'i, we are seeing a growing trend in adolescents developing Type 2 diabetes and other risk factors for heart disease.

Parents should be concerned. Diabetes can lead to high blood pressure, kidney disease, stroke, limb amputations and blindness as well as heart disease. A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/National Institutes of Health national study conducted at the Pacific Health Research Institute by Dr. Beatriz Rodriguez found that 37 percent of Asian and Pacific-islander youths with diabetes have two or more additional risk factors for heart disease such as high blood pressure, obesity and abnormal fats in the blood compared with 16 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

As a physician who has been in the public-health arena for over 30 years, I cannot recommend strongly enough that we close any loopholes that allow junk food to be sold in public schools.

Currently, state Department of Education's policy No. 6810 stipulates that "Eighty percent of beverage selections from each vending machine at the schools shall be healthy beverages." While that's laudable, it still means that 20 percent of the drinks could include Coke, Pepsi and other drinks that have no nutritional value. It also opens the door to bending the rules. Enforcing this "20 percent" rule is asking a lot of schools, which often depend on vending machine sales to augment their already paltry budgets. There is clearly a potential conflict of interest.

Last year, state Rep. Dennis Arakaki authored House Bill 377, which would provide nutritional standards for all food and drinks — including those sold in public school cafeterias as well as vending machines. Just as importantly, the bill would provide nutrition education for students. Arakaki will reintroduce the bill in next year's session.

Of course, parents ultimately are responsible for educating their children about proper diet. And I know from experience with my own children how difficult that job can be when the alternatives at school are so much more popular, accessible and more appealing than the alternatives I offer. Thus in addition to banning sales of junk food, parents need to work closely with school administrators and public officials to develop a "nutritional" curriculum.

The Pacific Health Research Institute salutes the Legislature's efforts to address the issue of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents. Given the ubiquity of the junk-food culture in our society, and all too little nutritional education, this is an important bill.

Just as in California and Britain, we need to pass legislation here that encourages healthy eating in our schools. Naturally we can't prevent kids from bringing sodas or potato chips to the school yard, but at the very least, we can set an example by stipulating that 100 percent of beverage selections sold in vending machines at public schools be "healthy."

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