

Kelly Horton

May 26, 2005

Honorable Patricia D. Jehlen  
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Representative Jehlen:

I am writing to ask you to join your colleague Peter Koutoujian in support of his proposed bill to reduce childhood overweight, An Act to Promote Proper School Nutrition, which will ban the sale of soft drinks and unhealthy snacks through vending machines during school hours. I also ask that you support the bills proposed mandated student participation in 120 hours of physical education and 50 hours of nutrition or wellness education annually.

According to the United States' Department of Health and Human Services overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. Excess calorie consumption through vending machines sales is a major health concern of parents, teachers, and the general public. Over-consumption can lead to overweight, placing children at higher risk for chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, Type 2 Diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis-related disabilities, sleep apnea and for developing obesity as adults. Additionally, overweight people often experience social discrimination and alienation; children can be especially cruel – through exclusion or harassment of their peers. Setting standards such as requiring vending machine products to contain no more than 50 percent of calories from fat, 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, and 35 percent of calories from sugar, is a step in exactly the right direction.

While some people may feel that this bill will grant the government too much control in the daily choices that our children make, I argue that these regulations will help parents by offering their children healthier choices while in school, a time when parents have little control over what, when and how much their children eat. While vending machines often bring in profits to the school – it should not be at the expense of our children's health. Vending machine contracts can be used responsibly to promote healthy options, as demonstrated by Stoneyfield Farms' vending machine program launched in Rhode Island last year and Coca-cola's ability to supply water and fruit juices containing 50 percent or more juice when required to do so.

This bill will help support our schools in their negotiations with both large and small vending machine suppliers. Soft drink companies and bottlers are already mounting a concerted effort to stop this bill from going through. However, I highly doubt that any of these companies will suffer terrible financial losses *when* it is passed – they will just change their products and continue to make millions of dollars; dollars earned directly from our children's hands.

Regardless of what is put in the vending machines, children need nutrition education so they can learn to make healthy food choices. In today's society children rarely have the opportunity to actually cook a meal from scratch, rather we are a society of convenience foods. Providing basic nutrition education such as how to read a food label, how to eat a balanced meal, and on what a serving size really is, is important to provide to youth so that from an early age they can begin to make informed decisions about the foods they consume – rather than just being led by advertising and potential false health claims.

Poor nutrition is only one factor that may increase the incidence of childhood overweight. According the CDC, "61.5 percent of children nine to 13 years of age do not participate in any organized physical activity during their non-school hours." A lack of activity and a sedentary life can also lead to overweight particularly in low-income populations where children may not have save neighborhoods to play and exercise in. By requiring schools to provide 120 hours of physical education annually children will receive at least 3 hours of physical activity a week in school, which meets just over half of the daily requirement for children according the 2005 Dietary Guidelines' recommendations of "at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days for the maintenance of good health and fitness and for healthy weight gain during growth."

Lastly, I also ask that you propose that the bill employ the proper terminology when referring to overweight and at-risk for overweight youth, according to most health professionals and medical institutions, including the American Dietetic Association, obesity is a medical term that should be used only when referring to adults. While some prominent and influential medical doctors have chosen to use the term "childhood obesity" in to order to heighten awareness around this very real issue, it is an incorrect and misleading use of the term. Children and teenage youth are stilling growing and although some may experience overweight and are in fact at risk for becoming obese, they may not. I encourage you to sign the bill along with Representative Koutoujian as the first step to ensure that they don't.

Sincerely,

Kelly Horton