Unsweetening our Students

by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Kids are fatter today than they once were. Lifestyle changes are doubtless to blame. One such change involves the ready availability of sugar-rich soda in many schools, where formerly the choices were just water and milk.

Happily, that trend may be reversed. In a deal brokered by former President Clinton and the American Heart Association, the big makers of soft drinks have agreed to a strategic retreat from the nation's schools. The pact banishes almost all soft drinks from elementary and middle schools and permits only diet soda, sports drinks, tea and flavored water in high schools, so long as they don't exceed 100 calories per bottle.

Both sides deserve credit for hammering out this deal, which will be phased in over four years - to give a chance for soda contracts to expire. True, the sacrifice isn't likely as great as it may appear at first blush for the soft drink companies. They do make low-calorie drinks that still would pass muster. Thus, they could keep their brand names in high schools. Accustoming kids to the brands seems to have been the chief motive for the sale of carbonated beverages in schools in the first place.

But a less enlightened industry, taking umbrage at any attempt by outsiders to meddle in its affairs, would have circled its delivery trucks and tried to fight off change. So give the soft drink industry plaudits for its farsightedness. No, this step alone won't work magic. The sale of soda in schools is but one of many factors behind the outbreak of obesity among children. Super-sized fast food has helped to create a super-sized generation. Also, kids just don't get the exercise they once did.

The agreement will hardly banish soda from children's diets. They likely drink the beverage at home and elsewhere. And, as high school students told the Journal Sentinel, banning the sale of soda at schools means that many kids will simply buy the beverage at nearby stores. Still, not having the drinks within as easy a reach as they are now should cut down to some extent on consumption, at least during school hours.

At the same time, schools ought to consider mounting educational campaigns for students and parents to encourage healthy diets, including the avoidance of sugar, for children. Don't looks matter to teens? Perhaps computer software could project from current photos of students the unhealthy blobs they could become on a sugar diet and the fit and trim figures that a healthy diet, along with exercise, could produce.

And, yes, schools have a role to play in exercise. They must reverse two fattening trends: the elimination of both outdoor recess and physical education. Schools - grade and middle schools especially - can also insist that children not bring soda from home for educational reasons. After banning soda sales three years ago, Wisconsin's Appleton Area School District noticed that students reported fewer headaches, had fewer discipline problems and appeared more attentive. Soft drink companies often gave cash-strapped schools a good deal of money for exclusive vending machine rights. How the deal will affect those contracts is hard to say now. But to its surprise, Appleton didn't lose money when it got rid of its soda machines. The school substituted the sale of healthy snacks, which proved popular - a tack other districts may want to follow.