House approves boost to nutrition in Oregon schools

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Bill sets health standards for food and beverages sold in K-12 schools; moves to Senate for approval

SALEMâ€”A bill backed by House Democrats to improve the nutrition of food sold in Oregon schools passed the House Tuesday with broad bi-partisan support.

â€œThe obesity epidemic facing children in Oregon and throughout the country is a crisis that demands a response from parents, from schools, from communities andâ€”yesâ€”from the legislature,â€• said State Representative and Healthcare Policy Committee Chair Mitch Greenlick (D-Portland). â€œThis bill is just one step we must take in order to ensure the future health and well being of our stateâ€™s children.â€•

House Bill 2650 will set minimum standards related to portion size and calories, sugar and fat content for foods and beverages sold to students through vending machines and school stores. The standards would also apply to school-prepared individual entrees, but not to the larger school lunch program administered by the US Department of Agriculture. The standards become effective for the 2008-2009 school year. The changes are consistent with recommendations released in a report this week by the Oregon Health Policy Commission.

â€œMessages about health and healthy eating that parents and teachers are sending to kids are being undermined by the availability of high calorie, sugary, fatty snack foods that kids are exposed to all day long in the corridors of our schools,â€• said State Representative Tina Kotek (D-N/NE Portland). â€œThis bill puts the lessons of our health curriculum into practice.â€•

Democrats say the bill is a result of concerns raised by a coalition of parents, public health advocates, physicians, nutritionists, teachers and administrators who have been concerned about the proliferation of unregulated junk sold in the schools.

â€œAs a parent and a legislator I know that our public schools should provide students with the best possible foundation for success. There is no doubt that health and nutrition are fundamental building blocks of that foundation,â€• said State Representative Suzanne Bonamici (D-Washington County) â€œThe bottom line is that healthy kids learn better.â€•

House bill 2650 now moves to the Senate for approval.