

Will banning junk food from schools help kids' health?

Just because it isn't around doesn't mean that they'll eat healthily

Kids will pick taste over health, so we need to limit the temptation



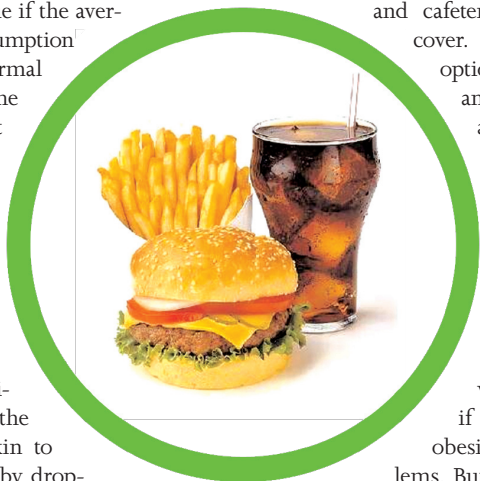
DAVID JOHNSTON

point

On Tuesday, the Edmonton Public School Board finally made the long-debated decision to eliminate the sale of junk food from their schools. It seems to me that this decision is not only heavy-handed and manipulative, but just plain pointless as well.

I'm not trying to argue if the average K-12 student's consumption of junk food is abnormal or contested. I think the real point here is that it's ultimately not the Edmonton Public School Board's place to step in and designate themselves the gatekeepers through which all nutritional decisions should be made. Merely eliminating junk food is the brute-force solution, akin to knocking down a wall by dropping a nuke. There's no guarantee that it'll work, and even if it does, it'll ultimately do more harm than good.

Trustee Dave Colburn's openly ambivalent definition of "junk food" (any food high in fat, sugar, or salt and low in nutritive value), is far too vague to be effective. Depending on your definitions of "high," "fat," "sugar," "low," and "nutritive value," that statement could describe virtually any food an overzealous trustee wants. Except celery;



no one can say anything bad about celery. It's not up to the schools to police the eating habits of the kids—that's a job for the parents, for the nutritionists, and for the kids themselves. If little Billy wants to gorge himself on Twix and Pepsi for two weeks, let him. He'll experience the side-effects soon enough, and will want to change his diet. Or not, in which case little Billy won't be that little much longer, and ultimately, that's nothing the EPSB can control.

If he wants his Twix fix, he'll walk a block to a gas station at lunch and buy them. Or he'll get it after school, sneak it in from home, or get the fat into his body in any one of a dozen ways that a slimming-down of the vending machines and cafeteria menus simply can't cover. Give him the facts, the option to change his diet, and the pros and cons of all paths. Letting him know all the options is the only way he'll ever make the conscious (and EPSB-desired) decision to improve his dietary health.

I don't know if this blanket-ban plan will work, and I don't know if it'll help control child obesity or dietary problems. But I do know that it's the wrong way to deal with the issue, and the underlying issues won't be solved by this ill-conceived plan to cut the fat. Change their education, change their attitudes, and introduce more nutritive choices. Pick a solution that's not an attempt to create an artificially sugar-free environment that, even if successful, will do nothing to help the kids once they're beyond the reach of the relatively short arm of the Edmonton Public School Board.



CONAL PIERSE

counterpoint

The Edmonton Public School Board is completely justified in outlawing sugary junk in order to promote a healthier environment for young children. Obesity is a major problem among today's youth, and to claim that such a move wouldn't be helpful is naïve.

This is not a matter of the School Board attempting to do parents' jobs for them; rather, they are simply nipping a known problem in the bud. Despite parents' best efforts to teach their children good nutrition, the fact still remains that these kids are, well, kids. And kids, as a rule, aren't generally known for doing what's best for them—look for the crying child with their tongue stuck to a piece of playground equipment, and you'll see my point.

There's only so much mom and dad can do at home to prevent their child's arteries from clogging up like a gas station toilet. Even by packing healthier lunches, a parent can't ensure that their child will only eat what has been given to them, as your lunch is more a gathering of bartering chips than a set deal. You just have to

find the kid who doesn't like raspberry Jell-O, and just like that, you've gone from a (mildly) healthy granola bar to a jiggling mass of sugar.

By taking these foods out of schools, you're putting them out of reach of elementary children who are confined to the school grounds, while older students are forced to venture to nearby corner stores. Yes, they still have access to it; however, the harsh Edmonton winter weather (one that tends to stretch over half of the school year), combined with inherent laziness, is enough to discourage this behaviour and turn it from a daily habit to a once-in-awhile treat.

Education can only do so much to encourage healthy eating practices. No matter how much nutritional information you give out, it's still counteracted by what they see on television. Vegetables elicit reactions akin to those seen to rancid deer testicles in "Fear Factor," and when was the last time you heard a catchy slogan for carrots?

Despite his size, the Green Giant simply isn't a match for Mark Messier and his insatiable hunger for chips.

Though we wish it were otherwise, kids are the type who will jump off the proverbial bridge not to follow their friends, but because it feels good. If the choice is between a Snickers bar and a pack of celery sticks, little Billy's taste-buds are going to get the better of him, and he'll soon be wiping caramel off his chinny-chin-chin.



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