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On Soda and Heroes

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Since my daughter was born four years ago, I have watched the story of soda and heroes unfold in the newspapers and on the web. I came across a quote on the website created by Parents Advocating School Accountability that I found inspiring. Margaret Mead once said: "Never doubt that a group of concerned citizens can change the world -- indeed it is the only thing that ever has." A San Francisco area parent, Caroline Grannan, had noticed the junk they were selling in her son's school. Because of the aggressive lobbying of a couple corporations, soda in school took off in mid-1998. Jude Maculec, a parent with two children attending High School, explained: "These companies aren't stupid. They're selling a way of life, and if a kid grows up drinking Coke, they become lifelong Coke drinkers."

Things now may be a "tipping point." "There are a bunch of people in sneakers supporting their schools and making changes within. We need to continue to keep on the state for an anti-obesity legislation. But neither should the schools wait for changes to happen," said author Deborah Heffernan of Bridgton, Maine. Ellen Brown, a parent and coordinator for MOVE, a Missoula group promoting healthful eating and physical activity, would send this message to Coke and Pepsi: "Stop hurting our kids."

One of my heroes has been Alex Molnar, Professor of Education Policy and Director of the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University. "My analogy would be to the story 'The Devil and Daniel Webster.' The school's made a pact with the devil in my view, and not only that but they've sold themselves real cheap. Arizona's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne, has said "There's got to be better ways for schools to make money than push sugar on kids."

The largest school districts in the country have gone soda free, to include New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle,

Austin, Buffalo, Scranton, and most recently, Sioux Falls. They agree: Kids' health matters. Practice what you teach. Model good choices. Schools don't keep comic books in the library and then use taxpayer funds to teach them not to read them.

Arnold Schwarzenegger has railed against soda in schools this month, saying it was "ludicrous" we sold soft drinks in school and that we were "destroying" our children with soda and junk food. It began getting especially scary when the studies started coming in about Type 2 diabetes and soda. "A couple of decades ago, we didn't even start looking for type 2 diabetes if a person was under the age of 45. That's out the window now," said Dr. Julian Naylor, director of the Alaska Native Medical Center Diabetes Program.

The parents around the country rallied around the cry "Food Fight!", the title of the book by Yale Professor Kelly Brownell, who includes two chapters on soda in schools. Margo Wootan, of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, explains that "Although physical activity is critically important to children's health and to maintaining a healthy weight, a 110-pound child would have to bike for 1 hour and 15 minutes to burn off a 20-ounce Coke." "Food marketing to children is big business aimed at uncritical minds," explained Marion Nestle, Chair, Department of Nutrition & Food Studies, New York University and author of "Food Politics." "Across the country, parents are saying they don't want their kids for sale. Not their time, not their health, not for sale," notes Gary Ruskin, executive director for Commercial Alert.

Many school board members have taken time to inform themselves on the issue. "I didn't bring 30,000 kids to our community to profit from them," School Board member Scott Strong declared. "Health is more important than the almighty dollar," said Chamberlain, South Dakota Superintendent Tim Mitchell. "Then we might as well legalize prostitution, too, so schools can make even more money," according to Sherlock Hirning, Eureka School superintendent. "I could make a fortune selling cigarettes, and I don't do it," said Dixie Heights High School Principal Kim Banta.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich of Illinois, for example, explained: "It's one thing for a parent to be vigilant at home in terms of the diet they provide for their kids, and then suddenly, they send them to school and all bets are off when they have access to vending machines with candy bars and soda pop."

But the ones who really added the fizz were the pediatricians and the dentists. Various groups issued a national call to arms in peer-reviewed publications. "[Schools with soda contracts] might be penny wise, but pound foolish," observed John Paschen, a pediatric doctor at McFarland Clinic in Ames, Iowa. "Mountain Dew Mouth" was the phrase coined by the Cody, Wyoming Dentist James Landers.

In just the past week or two, statewide bans have been introduced in North Dakota, Mississippi, Nebraska and now here in Arizona. Rep. Mark Anderson, R-Mesa, has now proposed that food and beverages sold in Arizona schools meet certain nutritional standards. Brita Butler Wall, co-founder of The Citizens' Campaign for Commercial-Free Schools (CCCS) a statewide grassroots, nonprofit organization based in Seattle, Washington, and now a Seattle School Board member, summarized: "The fate of these junk food bills in Washington state clearly shows that large corporations already have far more say in what goes on in our schools than parents, teachers and citizens combined, even when children's lives are at stake."

Let's show her that she's mistaken. Email your legislators and your school board. Show the corporations who has more clout when it comes to the health of the children of this State. Show them the power of a good idea. As the Parents Advocating School Accountability webpage says, quoting Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

Ross Getman, is an attorney who has brought an action in New York State that seeks to stop Coca-Cola's promotion of soda to schoolchildren through long-term exclusive contracts that are intended to prevent future boards from going soda-free.

<http://www.schoolpouringrights.com>