Fat Kids; Who's Responsible?

Sept. 17, 2003

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

Too many of our kids are too fat, so there ought to be a law. Turn the trial lawyers loose to blame the restaurants and the fast-food joints and give them the tobacco treatment. Right?
As with many other problems in our society today, the government may not be the solution, but it could be part of the problem.

Recent studies show that eleven percent of American children and adolescents are obese, and one in three is overweight. They face a costly future as obese adults, plagued by heart disease, high cholesterol levels, several types of cancer, and type II diabetes (which has risen 50 percent in the last ten years).

So why are we allowing public schools to impose an obesity- friendly environment on all students, even on those who come from homes where calorie-laden eatables are not allowed? Why do we permit schools to provide easy availability of junk foods, sodas, snacks and sweets from vending machines, and non-nutritious school lunches?

Why? Follow the money. These foods are big money-makers, and the schools get their cut from the profits. Nine out of ten U.S. schools now run lucrative a la carte programs at lunchtime. A la carte is French for selling kids sodas and junk foods as alternatives to school lunches.

Sodas from vending machines are sold in at least 60 percent of all middle schools and high schools, and the Texas statistics released by the state's Agriculture Commissioner are probably typical. With a majority of school districts responding to the survey, 52 percent had exclusive vending contracts with drink and food companies (63 percent of those contracts with Coca-Cola and 15 percent with Pepsi).

A study of Minneapolis-St.Paul-area schools published in the American Journal of Public Health tactfully described 93 percent of the a la carte foods sold to students as "foods to limit." In the schools where they were sold, students ate fewer fruits and vegetables and consumed more calories from fat and saturated fat than health guidelines stipulate.

Public schools must take a big share of responsibility for the current epidemic of childhood obesity, not only because of the kinds of foods and drinks they sell or give away, but because of the inducements that flow from easy availability and peer pressure. Of course, parents can't be excused from responsibility, but it's unrealistic to say it's the parents' job to forbid their children to eat, drink or buy what the schools provide.

Where are the anti-prayer-in-schools and anti-pledge-of-allegiance lawyers who argue the right of atheist children not to be embarrassed in front of their peers? We could use their help to protect the health of schoolchildren who don't want to be embarrassed by the school- sponsored inducements to eat and drink unhealthy foods and sodas.

Schools have become a major marketing venue for companies, even more important than direct advertising. Yet there's been no public debate, or even a debate within the education community, about the adverse effects of commercializing childhood or about making kids pay with obesity for their school's profits from vending machines and a la carte menus.

Corporations look upon school children as a very profitable market because even elementary school children have an estimated $15 billion of their own money and may influence $160 billion in parental purchases. The school administrators who sign the million-dollar contracts (without, of course, approval from parents), serve up the schoolchildren as a captive market to the corporations.

Parents who want their children to eat better can send them to school with a lunch bag from home. But (and here comes peer pressure again) surveys show that teenagers who bring a lunch usually trade it or put it in the trash.

Some local campaigns are beginning to take unhealthy foods out of schools. Palm Beach County, Florida has inaugurated a program called Fresh-2-U that encourages students to try 20 different fresh fruits and vegetables during the school year.

This program comes with coloring pages, posters, and music videos about the produce to appeal to the MTV generation. Report cards for fifth graders will tally their fruit and vegetable consumption.

Fresh-2-U is also improving the nutritional quality of school lunches and adding a dozen "healthy" vending machines in middle and high school. New machine-dispensing items will include tuna, milk and yogurt.

The exercise component of a get-trim regimen for kids may prove more difficult. Only 8 percent of elementary schools in Palm Beach County have daily recess.

The elimination of recess is one of the trendy policies imposed on schoolchildren by the feminists who want to make little boys behave like little girls. Eliminating recess gets rid of masculine games such as cops and robbers.