

# Study Looks At Schools' Food Values

## *Outside Report Urges Ban on Junk Snacks*

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Montgomery County's public schools should ban fundraisers that promote fast food, candy and other low-nutrition items, reestablish its Wellness Committee and strengthen its policy on food and beverage marketing, according to a new report by the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

The report, commissioned nearly two years ago by the County Council at the suggestion of George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), comes as concern is growing over the role schools can play in reducing childhood obesity. Leventhal said the goal of the report was to examine how food is marketed to students in the state's largest school system.

This is the first time an outside group has attempted to evaluate the food-related images that county students see during the school day. The study included a representative sample of 24 elementary schools and six middle and high schools.

Montgomery County school officials, who attended a hearing on the report last month, said they welcome the report's findings and are moving toward putting into place some of its recommendations.

"We're grateful for the collaborative efforts from the folks here at the table," said school board member Sharon W. Cox (At Large). School officials said they are looking into reestablishing the Wellness Committee, which helped develop a school wellness policy nearly two years ago, as well as other strategies

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## Report Urges Schools to Promote Better Eating

for promoting healthy life choices among students. The report painted a picture of a system that had made significant gains in offering students smarter food selections but that also could do more to promote better eating habits. As part of the recommendations, school officials are urged to refrain from using the fronts of vending machines for brand-name marketing. Instead, it recommends using images of nutritious food or nonfood images.

Kathy Lazor, director of food and nutrition for Montgomery schools, said at the hearing that a new vending contract calls for contractors to replace images of corporate logos, such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi, with pictures of healthful foods or of people engaged in activities that boost fitness, such as biking and walking.

"Junk food marketing undermines nutrition education in school," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the District-based Center for Science in the Public Interest.

The report's authors found that the majority of Montgomery's 200 schools had posters and signs that marketed food and beverages. Of those, about 42 percent marketed

healthier categories of foods and beverages. But other posters marketed restaurants, prepared foods and soft drinks, the report said.

It also found that high schools had an average of 21 vending machines. Water was the most commonly offered beverage, but the report noted that soda, juice drinks and ice tea were included. Candy, cookies, crackers and chips were the most commonly found snack foods. The report found that more than 80 percent of the machines had some kind of "brand" marketing on their exteriors.

Three years ago, officials established new nutrition standards, limiting the types of beverages and snacks that could be sold during school hours. During the school day, students are permitted to buy only water, 100 percent juice products and juice beverages containing at least 50 percent juice. Students can purchase so-called "sports drinks," but those machines must be adjacent to physical education facilities. Snack items must also meet certain standards for the amount of fat and sugar.

However, some critics have noted that students still have access to soda and snacks once the school day has ended. "Although MCPS

has a strong vending policy, many vending machines contain soda, sweetened teas and drinks, sports drinks, candy, cookies and chips," the report's authors wrote.

Leventhal was particularly alarmed to hear that in some instances, school fundraisers at McDonald's restaurants have teachers serving Big Macs and Quarter Pounders to their students.

The 22-page report also found that unlike other school systems across the country, marketing through school supplies, scholarships, sponsorships and "branded" curricula (curricula tied to a particular company) is present but

not prevalent. However, the report's authors cited one program, the Pizza Hut Book It! program, used in at least four elementary schools, in which teachers gave certificates to students who met reading goals. The certificates entitled students to a free personal-size pizza.

Overall, high school students are exposed to more food and beverage marketing than younger students, the report said. However, elementary students are more likely to see "branded" curricula in the classroom and to participate in proof-of-purchase promotions, the report said.

The report indicated that al-

though Montgomery has a system-wide policy that "marketing activities will promote healthful behaviors," only about half the schools reported that they had a verbal or written policy regarding such advertising. Cox pledged to investigate this disconnect between policy and schools.

According to the report, all high schools, about half the middle schools and about 30 percent of the elementary schools surveyed had fundraisers that involved the sale of candy, baked goods, soda, fast food or other restaurant food. The most common fundraiser involved a "school night" at a local restaurant, in which schools were given a percentage of that evening's sales. The report's authors recommended a ban on this type of fundraising.