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French schools' new *bête noire*: vending machines

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BOURGES, FRANCE - France has a weighty problem with the Lycée Jacques Coeur. It is a public school, and public schools, French officials say, are making students soft.

Not due to lax academic standards, mind you. No, the problem with the Lycée Jacques Coeur lies in its stained-glass student lounge, where a flashy vending machine has become the symbol of an alarming rise in childhood obesity.

This summer, France voted to ban all vending machines that sell candy and soft drinks in schools. By next school year, an estimated 8,000 machines in France's middle and secondary schools must be removed.

Long considered an American scourge, weight problems among young people are reaching crisis proportion in Europe. According to a study by the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of overweight and obese children has doubled in France and Germany in the past 10 years.

In response, the French parliament has targeted vending machines, and voted to impose new taxes on junk-food producers if they fail to advertise health warnings.

The controversial measure marks a turning point in Europe, experts say. "The clamor from people all over the world to take action is phenomenal," says Neville Rigby, policy director of the International Obesity Task Force in London. Several European countries are following France's lead.

Last month, authorities in Brussels banned vending machines in all of the city's primary schools. In Germany, local officials now ban kiosks from selling candy and sodas near schools. And England's primary schools give every pupil between 5 and 7 a piece of fruit.

But France has gone the furthest. It has made healthy eating such a priority that primary schools now offer nutrition classes.

School vending machines are a relatively new phenomenon in Europe. They're prevalent in England but non-existent in Germany; about 40 percent of French schools have them. The machines here give a percentage of their proceeds to student organizations - not to the school themselves - which may receive several hundred to several thousand euros per year to spend on activities.

And the incentives from junk-food makers are growing. "Coca-Cola is starting to say that it's willing to sponsor a school's [running] team, and that's tempting," says Michel Richard, a principal in Versailles, near Paris. "There is a very strong marketing offensive which violates the French state's commercial neutrality."

Mr. Richard got rid of the machines, just months after having them installed. "Vending machines," he says, "become a point of fixation for all kinds ... of violence."

Snackmakers, not surprisingly, aren't happy. "By banning our distributors, the politicians have cheaply appeased their consciences," says Jean Louis Bariller of the National Association of Automated Sales. He argues that students will always buy what they want at the supermarket.

Experts agree that vending machines are not solely to blame for rising childhood obesity. But Klaus Hurrelmann, a professor of public health who heads the collaborative center on

childhood and adolescent health of the World Health Organization in Bielefeld, Germany, says limiting the availability of unhealthy food is a proven public health measure.

What's needed, he says, is an overall campaign to get French children to recover the healthy eating traditions of their parents and grandparents.

In France, eating well doesn't mean counting carbs and balancing protein intake. Rather, it involves sharing a leisurely, sumptuous meal with family or friends. American dieters might find it frustrating that a staple of meat, cheese, and demi-glace nourishes such a healthy population. But nutritionists note that this cuisine leaves little room for snacks.

The problem, observers say, is that French children have lost touch with this tradition, succumbing to the Americanization of eating habits. Faster-paced lifestyles mean that TV dinners and fast food are replacing leisurely family meals.

"The rhythm of taking meals is destroyed," says Mr. Hurrelmann. "They do not have the feeling of taking their food as a social activity because they're only concentrated on themselves." The result, Hurrelmann says, is that "they're making meals a side activity, which is very dangerous because they don't have any control over their intake anymore."

Charlene Brochard, a junior at Lycée Jacques Coeur, says that even without vending machines, many students will go to the supermarket to buy junk food. Rather than getting rid of vending machines, she says the government should launch a campaign targeting parents.

"The problem is the small ones.... When they cry, the parents give them a cookie. The parents give what the kids want, when they want it. And the bad habits remain."

"It's an entire education that has to be re-done," Brochard says.

But Hurrelmann says that the type of "strict, clear-cut" policy adopted by France makes sense. "It's very important to start with the children," he says. "Only by starting in schools early can we influence the parents."

Four years ago, France became the first country to tax "mixed drinks" that combine rum with lemonade. Since then, consumption of mixed drinks among adolescents has decreased, according to a WHO study. Germany adopted the measure this fall.

"Taking the success of this measure as a case study, it is a hint that this type of policy does work," says Hurrelmann.

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