

4/26/16

To: House Committee on Education, David Sharpe – Chair

Re: H.376 An act relating to the limitation of food and beverage advertising on public elementary school grounds.

The proposed bill H.376 on limiting food and beverage advertising in Vermont's public schools is a bill intended to protect our children from the well designed, often sly marketing methods and to create a more “pure” learning environment. It's the government's job to ensure a healthy environment for public school, and this extends to “visual pollution” such as ads on school grounds.

Led by Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move campaign, awareness of children’s health and the role of advertising in public schools have improved. However, banning ads is not directly promoting health. For example, diet sodas don’t contain the high sugar content, but diet soda lacks nutrition. To address the issue of children’s health in a bi-partisan manner, an advertising bill should retain the viable option for school revenue through advertising. This may seem counter-intuitive, but advertising can be embraced as a tool for promoting children's health - it’s the government’s job to ensure that solution is safe, healthy, and inclusive. Instead of prohibiting advertising, a more effective bill could allow ads that promote healthy choices – even in a limited capacity.

Outright bans taking away choices often provokes backlash stifling progress for public interest. A historical review of the tobacco’s industry playbook on how to stall outlawing is the most known example. A more recent example is former New York City Mayor Bloomberg’s recent failure to ban super-size sodas. No matter how noble or rational a policy might be - from children to businesses to policy makers - choices matter to people. Instead of taking choice away, a bill that uses ads to promote what healthy choices are available has the potential to be more effective. David Just and Brian Wansink at Cornell have conducted dozens economic behavior theory experiments in school lunchrooms and discovered that positive response (i.e. choosing healthier food) was greater in situations with two or more options compared to only one or no option. In one experiment, students ate more carrots when given the option of carrots or celery than when they were only given the options of carrots alone. This theory extrapolates to school boards, private businesses, legislatures, and community members.

Even if most people agree to healthy learning environments for children, the reality is many schools depend on the advertising to supplement revenue and boost sales of food and beverage items. Banning all advertising has the potential to go down the same arduous path as tobacco, and it does not fully address the root problem – children’s health and agency. Instead, ads could be used to promote healthy eating in an environment fostering agency and choice. Schools need options to support tight funding for activities and programs. To conclude, choice is important, and with guidance, ad choice can be healthy and heuristic. I recommend H.376 be re-written to promote healthy ads in schools.

Sincerely,

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## **Bibliography**

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