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Should Drinks Like Gatorade Sport the 'Junk Food' Label?

By [Jane Black](#)
Staff Writer

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A billion-dollar battle over selling sports drinks and "enhanced" water in public schools has spilled into Congress and threatens to derail a major attempt to cut back the sale of junk food from school vending machines and snack bars.

In an attempt to limit the sale of high-calorie sodas, candy bars and other snacks in schools, [Sen. Tom Harkin](#) (D-Iowa) has introduced a bill that would have the government set new nutritional standards for the foods and drinks that schools sell to students outside cafeterias. But just what those standards should be is the issue.

Public health advocates want the standards to ban the sale of [Gatorade](#) and [Powerade](#), which typically contain as much as two-thirds the sugar of sodas and more sodium, as well as sweetened waters such as VitaminWater and SoBe Life Water. Excessive sodium intake by young people could fuel a surge in high blood pressure, which until recently was considered a health threat only in later life, they said.

The trade group representing Coca-Cola, Pepsi and other bottlers, whose annual sales of sports drinks reached \$7.5 billion last year, counters that sports drinks and sweetened waters are lower in calories, "appropriate" for high school students and "essential" to young athletes. In 2006, sports drinks were the third fastest growing beverage category in the United States, after energy drinks, such as [Red Bull](#), and bottled water, according to the trade journal Beverage Digest.

Under current law, meals served in school cafeterias must meet some standards, but snack bars, school stores and vending machines may sell anything that contains at least trace amounts of protein, vitamins and minerals. The result: Many students make a meal out of a bag of chips, a sports drink and a chocolate bar.

The current version of the legislation requires the [Agriculture Department](#) to begin developing the rules behind the standards, but industry and public health advocates both favor speeding things up by writing the standards into the legislation itself.

Having agreed voluntarily to phase out full-calorie sodas from schools by 2009, bottlers are heavily promoting the sports drinks, and not just to athletes. A recent television ad for the new product Gatorade A.M. shows [NBA](#) player [Kevin Garnett](#) dressed like a milkman, dropping bottles of Gatorade at the doorsteps of active suburban parents and kids.

Harkin's bill, which he hopes to incorporate into this fall's farm bill, has been co-sponsored by 25 senators. More than 100 organizations, from the American Federation of Teachers to the Yale Prevention Research Center, support the plan. Eager to avoid bad publicity, even the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the American Beverage Association, which have historically resisted any regulation, say they are "open to discussing" federal standards to avoid a patchwork of state and county rules.

But the bottlers do not want the standards to prohibit sports drinks and enhanced waters. Without bottler support, it will be difficult to sign up members of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee, which is chaired by Harkin but includes beverage industry supporters such as ranking Republican [Saxby Chambliss](#), who represents [Coke's](#) home state of [Georgia](#).

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School vending machines, like those at Broadmoor High in Baton Rouge, often offer soda and other high-sugar treats. (By Arthur D. Lauck -- Associated Press)

Nutrition experts contend that sports drinks are not as healthful as manufacturers claim. A 12-ounce bottle of Gatorade Rain contains 75 calories, 21 grams of sugar and 165 milligrams of sodium, compared with 150 calories, 40.5 grams of sugar and 52 milligrams of sodium in a can of Coke.

In April, the [Institute of Medicine](#) released a report urging that sports drinks be made available in schools only to student-athletes participating in more than one hour of vigorous activity. And a report from the [University of California at Berkeley's](#) Robert C. and Veronica Atkins Center for Weight and Health warned that students who drink one 20-ounce sports drink every day for a year may gain about 13 pounds.

Nutritionists also warn of excessive salt consumption among more sedentary students. A 20-ounce bottle of Gatorade contains approximately 275 milligrams of sodium, almost 12 percent of the recommended daily allowance for people ages 14 to 18. Already, more than 75 percent of children consume more than the recommended 2,300 milligrams of sodium each day, according to the Institute of Medicine.

"Most kids you see carrying around sports drinks are not athletes," said Mary Story, a professor of nutrition at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health and one of the authors of the institute's report. "When you look at the ingredients, it's water, high-fructose corn syrup and salt. The question is, who is really benefiting? Is it the kids or the companies that make [the drinks]?"

Sales in schools are rising. The beverage association reported that sports drinks increased their market share in schools from 14.6 percent in 2004 to 20 percent in the 2006-2007 school year. During the same period, full-calorie sodas' share dropped from 39.9 percent to 29.8 percent.

Sports drinks are particularly good for the bottom line. Pepsi-owned Gatorade, which has an 80.2 percent market share, contributed 15 percent of Pepsi's profit growth in the 2006 fiscal year, according to Robert Van Brugge, an industry analyst at Sanford Bernstein. Powerade isn't as significant a profit driver for Coca-Cola, but, Van Brugge notes, the company spent \$4.1 billion in May to purchase VitaminWater parent Glaceau. "They have to make that investment work," he said.

Beverage companies have spent millions making sure that sports drinks are associated with health and athletics. According to Competitive Media Research, Pepsi spent \$81 million promoting Gatorade for a three-month period that ended in May. Ending up on a list of school junk foods could undermine that healthful, sporty image.

"For years we've been programmed to believe that sports drinks are healthy and you need to replenish those electrolytes after you go out and walk the dog," said Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#). "They don't want any official sanctioning of the idea that sports drinks are associated with obesity."

A few school districts have already fought nutrition battles over sports drinks, and [Connecticut](#) last fall became the first, and so far only, state to have passed legislation barring sports drinks and enhanced waters in schools. Both [Maryland](#) and [Virginia](#) rules permit them, though [Montgomery County](#) has mandated that sports drinks be available only in the sports education areas. The District of Columbia's new wellness policy, which awaits final approval from Schools Chancellor [Michelle Rhee](#), also rejects sports drinks.

The president of the Connecticut Senate, Donald Williams, said the beverage industry's high-pressure lobbying made his state's bill one of the most contentious in his 14 years in office. "People were throwing themselves in front of the bus on behalf of the soda companies," he said.

Kevin Keane, the beverage association's vice president for communications, said the attack on sports drinks is misguided. "These drinks are low in calories and the portion sizes are capped," he said. "They have benefits to the student. Where you have students competing in athletics throughout the day, it's an essential beverage to make available. These are very reasonable, common-sense things."

For Harkin, allowing sports drinks and enhanced waters to remain in schools could be a deal-breaker. "Our most recognized national health watchdog -- the Institute of Medicine -- said sports drinks are equivalent to flavored water, noting their high sugar content," he said. "If the beverage industry is serious about the health of our kids, as it repeatedly claims to be, science and sound health should be the guiding principle."