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Connecticut Lawmakers Debate Strict Bill on School Nutrition

By [ALISON LEIGH COWAN](#)

NEW HAVEN, May 9 - Connecticut's public schools would be banned from selling soft drinks and certain snacks during the school day under a proposal that is expected to face a final vote in the legislature in the next few days.

The proposal, the most far-reaching effort by any state to control the snacks and drinks students can buy at school, must still overcome opposition from an array of lobbyists representing the food and beverage industry, the teamsters who supply the vending machines, and school boards, including those with lucrative deals with soft drink companies.

Other states, including California and Arizona, have taken similar steps, but those states ultimately exempted high schools from the bans they imposed on soft drink sales in elementary and middle schools in the face of determined industry lobbying.

The proposal, which passed the Connecticut Senate by a 24-to-11 vote last month, would ban the sale of soft drinks at all public schools, with some exceptions for school-sponsored events on weekends and evenings. Sports drinks containing electrolytes could continue to be sold in high schools, but not until a half-hour after school ends. Under state law, schools already cannot sell coffee, tea, candy and soda during and around mealtimes.

"This would be the strongest bill in the whole country that we have seen so far in that it applies to anywhere on campus, any time, kindergarten through 12th grade, and beverages as well as snacks," said Margo Wootan, the director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington.

The proposal, known as the school nutrition bill and nicknamed "the junk food bill" by some, would also require the Department of Education in Connecticut to draw up a list of allowable snack foods available for sale in school stores, vending machines and in the parts of the cafeteria that are not serving the official school breakfast or lunch programs.

The measure would also mandate 20 minutes a day of recess for all children in kindergarten through fifth grade, an increase from the current rule that schools simply provide a break of any length of time.

So far, support for the bill has broken down heavily along party lines, with the Democrats who control the legislature generally favoring the proposal, and Republicans quarreling with it. Many credit its quick passage in the Senate to the Democratic caucus's unwillingness to break with Donald E. Williams Jr.,

the Senate president pro tem, who had pushed for its passage.

The battle in the House has proven harder.

Coca-Cola and Pepsi bottlers have top lobbyists arguing their case. Also speaking out against the bill has been the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education. "We don't like the bill," said Sheila McKay, a government relations specialist for the association.

She said schools were already struggling with federal mandates to improve test scores and would be hard-pressed to extend the school day to incorporate more recess without upending labor contracts. She also said her group thought it misplaced to focus only on what children drink and eat at school.

"We certainly see this as the responsibility of the parents as well," she said.

Representative Robert M. Ward, a Republican who is the House minority leader, said he shared some of those qualms. He said Republican opponents of the bill favored local control when possible.

"Republicans, generally speaking, have been much more reluctant to pass school mandates and are more willing to trust local school boards," he said.

To proponents of the bill who say Connecticut has a chance to be in the lead on a central child welfare issue, Mr. Ward said, "I don't want to lead the way in being the nanny state."

Lucy Nolan, the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut, a nonprofit advocacy group that has pushed for Connecticut to ban soft drinks and junk food for three years, said that the financial impact on schools should be minimal because students would substitute other products such as milk, bottled water and fruit juice for the ones being removed from vending machines.

"Towns should not be making money off of the health and well-being of our children," Ms. Nolan said.

Besides, she added: "We're not talking about taking away the vending machines. We're talking about replacing what's in them."

Gov. M. Jodi Rell, a Republican, has not said whether she supports the legislation. The governor's spokesman, Dennis Schain, said she would have to see the final language of the bill before deciding whether or not to sign it into law.