

Parents Advocating School Accountability,
San Francisco
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SNACK-INDUSTRY SHILLS FIGHT EFFORTS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL FOOD

SAN FRANCISCO – That impartial-seeming health expert showing up in news stories on school food and childhood nutrition – the one who provides sound bites like “all foods can fit into a balanced diet” – may be cashing paychecks from the junk-food and soda industries.

Snack manufacturers fund a roster of benignly named organizations purporting to provide expertise on health and nutrition issues. These groups fall into a category known as “astroturf,” a clever reference to the fact that they falsely represent themselves as grassroots organizations. Unwitting reporters quoting groups with names like the American Council on Fitness and Nutrition are sometimes unaware that their sources are actually promoting snack-food-industry interests.

With childhood obesity and related life-threatening conditions soaring, a growing national movement calling for the elimination of junk-food sales in schools, and the press energetically following the issues, astroturf groups are aggressively attempting to influence news coverage.

The Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), a respected media-criticism publication, spotlighted one such recent deception. The Today Show that aired on June 12, 2003, featured, according to CJR, “Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, president of the seemingly independent American Council on Science and Health,” who defended “ ‘potato chips and Twinkies and all those other maligned foods if you don’t eat huge amounts of them.’ ”

The Today Show failed to mention that the American Council on Science and Health, has listed soft drink, candy and snack manufacturers as its funding sources, though it has recently stopped listing its supporters. The non-disclosure of Whelan’s industry ties drew a “dart” for the Today Show in the September-October 2003 CJR “Darts & Laurels” column.

The organizations below are astroturf groups funded by or linked to snack-food, soda and candy interests.

-- American Council on Fitness and Nutrition (ACFN)

<http://www.acfn.org/about/members.html>

This organization hoodwinked Knight-Ridder’s Washington bureau for a September 2003 article on junk-food vending in schools. The story quoted Dr. Susan Finn, chairwoman of ACFN and a former president of the American Dietetic Association (see below), as opposing limits on school junk-food sales. The story didn’t mention that ACFN represents snack-food-industry interests.

-- American Council on Science and Health

<http://www.acsh.org/about/advisors.html>

Described above. Its website lists “advisors” including the Progress and Freedom Foundation, an organization that promotes “limited government, free markets and individual sovereignty.”

http://www.pff.org/what_we_do.htm

-- Californians for Sensible School Nutrition Policy

This group spearheaded opposition to California’s Senate Bill 19, which was intended to require sales of exclusively healthy food in schools statewide. Members include soft-drink, snack, sugar, vending-machine and other food-industry interests. (SB19 eventually passed, but in a watered-down form that makes its provisions entirely contingent upon funding, which has not materialized. Thus the bill is functionally ineffectual.)

<http://www.gmabrand.com/news/docs/Testimony.cfm?DocID=833>

-- Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF)

http://www.consumerfreedom.com/main_faq.cfm

This group, “supported by restaurants (and) food companies,” is the bare-knuckles representative of the junk-food interests. CCF runs ads in major publications ridiculing health activists, including children’s advocates. It has also probed and publicized the backgrounds of activists who campaigned successfully for a healthy food policy in Los Angeles schools, as described in an Aug. 10, 2003, San Francisco Chronicle editorial, “Truth is Elusive in Soda Battle as Industry-Funded 'Experts' Testify.”

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/08/10/ED256767.DTL>

In addition to the astroturfs, a number of organizations that would be expected to give top priority to children’s health have opposed efforts to eliminate junk-food and soda sales in schools. Such groups – which raise money selling snacks and soft drinks and sometimes receive additional industry support – have made generating income a higher priority than childhood nutrition.

In California, such organizations are marked by having opposed SB19 and the newly signed SB 677, which will ban soda sales in elementary and middle schools. SB677 passed after high schools were removed from the proposed soda ban. The following is a limited sampling of such groups.

-- California Association of Directors of Activities (CADA)

<http://www.cada1.org/>

CADA actively opposed both SB19 and SB677 and has allowed its name and that of its legislative advocate, Peter Cahn, to be used in soda-industry press materials supporting sales of soft drinks in schools. CADA, which receives financial support from the soda industry, vigorously promotes the idea that student and youth activities need to sell soft drinks to survive.

-- California Association of Student Leaders (CASL)

<http://www.casl1.org/>

CASL, run by CADA (above) with sponsorship from Coca-Cola and Pepsi, opposed SB19 and SB677.

-- California School Food Service Association (CSFSA)

<http://www.csfsa.org/>

The CSFSA – the professionals in charge of feeding schoolchildren – supported soda sales in schools by opposing SB677. And the CSFSA supported SB19 only after it helped weaken the original bill into the current toothless compromise version.

-- National School Boards Association (NSBA)

<http://www.nsba.org/site/>

The NSBA opposes legislation eliminating junk-food or soda sales at schools.

Dietitians, the professionals ostensibly most committed to childhood nutrition, are represented by the respected American Dietetic Association. While the ADA's ethics are not in question, some of its members cite their ADA credentials as they speak on behalf of soft-drink and junk-food interests as paid shills, often failing to disclose their industry ties.

As noted above, former ADA President Dr. Susan Finn is now chair of the junk-food-industry-funded American Council on Fitness and Nutrition (ACFN), yet gave a September press interview identifying herself as a former ADA president but omitting her financial ties to the snack-food industry. This summer, California dietitian Lisa Mosing testified against SB677 without disclosing the fact that the California Nevada Soft Drink Association was paying her to do so, according to the San Francisco Chronicle ("Truth is Elusive in Soda Battle as Industry-Funded 'Experts' Testify," Aug. 10, 2003).

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/08/10/ED256767.DTL>

And on another front, Nutrition Advisory Councils set up in schools as a way for students to provide input on school food are being touted as an industry strategy for marketing to children – by the California School Food Service Association. "Industry can utilize these local committees to facilitate the sales of their products," announces the CSFSA website. "We encourage our vendor supporters to work in the schools with the students to promote healthy lifestyles and of course product consumption."

<http://www.csfsa.org/NAC.htm>

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For more information on school food issues, including a complete media archive, go to www.pasasf.org.