

Parents Advocating School Accountability
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School groups' ties to soda industry

A leader of the California Association of Directors of Activities (CADA), an organization that supports school sports and other student activities, is lending his and CADA's names to soft-drink industry public relations material.

At a time when debate over school soda and junk food sales is heating up - with children's health advocates on one side and some fundraisers on the other - the use of enthusiastic quotes from CADA legislative advocate Peter Cahn in soda industry PR raises questions about the industry's influence on educators. CADA also receives some financial support from the soft-drink industry, Cahn says.

CADA also runs a student organization, the California Association of Student Leaders (CASL), and is "affiliated with both the National Association of Secondary Principals and the Association of California School Administrators," according to the CADA website. The implication that organizations of students, principals and administrators may also have ties to the soft-drink industry alarms children's advocates.

Cahn was quoted in a Feb. 21, 2003, press release from the National Soft Drink Association (NSDA) praising school activities departments' "positive relationship with our local soft-drink companies." The press release cited Cahn's position with CADA. Cahn said he was not paid for the use of his name or comments.

CADA and the student group, CASL, also actively opposed California's Senate Bill 19, a 2001 bill that imposed modest nutrition standards for school food. Both organizations signed statements against SB19 as part of the so-called Californians for Sensible School Nutrition, an organization otherwise composed of junk-food industry trade groups.

Cahn said that CADA supports sound nutrition, but that soft-drink sales provide needed funds for student activities.

The soda industry's apparent ties to CADA and the other organizations trouble San Francisco children's advocate Margaret Brodtkin. "America's children now drink more soda than milk, and it has a devastating effect on their health," said Brodtkin, executive director of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth. "When an education organization purporting to promote physical education fronts for the soft-drink industry and opposes efforts to improve children's nutrition, it's an outrageous example of the damage caused by for-profit companies' exploitation of public schools."

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For more information on school food issues, and for a free downloadable guide to getting rid of junk food at your child's school, go to www.pasasf.org.