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Parents Advocating School Accountability
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Industry claims kids don't drink much soda

The embattled soft-drink industry, under fire from children's health advocates for its aggressive marketing to schoolchildren, has adopted a startling new PR strategy: insisting that its products really aren't very popular.

The soft-drink industry vigorously promotes not just school vending machines but also controversial "pouring rights" contracts, under which a school or district sells one company's products exclusively. "The school system is where you build brand loyalty," declared John Alm, president and chief operating officer of Coca-Cola Enterprises, quoted in the April 6, 2003, Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Yet the official line of the National Soft Drink Association holds that middle school and high school students drink only 16.3 ounces of soda on average at school per week. Maxime Buyckx, Coca-Cola's director of nutrition, cited that figure in a May 5, 2003, Atlanta Journal-Constitution article.

That claim contrasts sharply with figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture showing that teenagers consume nearly half a quart of soda per day. The USDA says that 56 to 85 percent of children drink soda on any given day, with the percentage varying by age and gender. Teenage boys drink the most, with more than a third downing more than three cans a day.

And business analysts reported that Coca-Cola's annual sales in schools amounted to \$200 million, according to the March 26, 2001, Advertising Age.

Some soda-promoting school administrators and media repeat the industry line. In Denver, a district where the soft-drink industry has made major inroads, schools Superintendent Jerry Wartgow told the Denver Post that the average Denver public school student drinks less than a can of soda per week. The Denver Post repeated the claim in a May 3, 2003, editorial supporting soda sales in schools.

And an industry lobbying group called the Center for Consumer Freedom downplays soda consumption even more, modestly insisting that "most students buy just two dozen cans of soda from the machines in a school year." The industry claims refer not to total soda consumption but merely to the purported quantities kids buy at school.

One Denver student told a TV news station that those claims didn't apply to her. "Pop means a lot to me. It's the only thing I drink," West High School student Isabell Pacheco told Denver's 7NEWS for a Feb. 7, 2003, report.

Nutritionists view USDA figures as reliable. While the Center for Consumer Freedom website brands healthy-food advocates “food cops, health care enforcers, militant activists, meddling bureaucrats and violent radicals, ” the USDA is more often seen as staid, conservative and influenced by food industry lobbying.

Many in the nutrition field, violent radicals or not, express concern about teens’ excessive soft-drink consumption. "Some teen-agers, boys and girls alike, are consuming up to five cans of soda every day," Dr. Robert Keith, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) nutritionist, said in an ACES press release. "And while sodas have calories, they have no other nutritional value. ... If a teen is consuming roughly 2,000 calories a day, which includes five sodas, between 30 and 40 percent of their calories are coming from soft drinks."

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For more information on school food, and for a free downloadable guide on improving the food at your child's school, go to www.pasasf.org.