

Victory for Philadelphia's Children: Soda Ban

On February 4, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission (SRC) approved a proposal to ban soda and other sweetened drinks from all of the District's schools. The new policy, effective July 1, 2004, is being described as "one of the toughest" in the nation. It will restrict beverage sales to milk, 100 percent fruit juice and water; sport drinks will only be sold in the high school physical activity areas. The serving size will be 12 ounces in the elementary schools and 16 ounces in the high schools. In addition, caffeine cannot exceed 15 milligrams per 8 ounce.

Much of the credit for this victory goes to The Food Trust for its success in organizing healthcare professionals and members of the community. Trust staff have been working for years to see this policy realized. The effort intensified in 1999 when Coca-Cola proposed a \$43 million, 5-year beverage contract to the Philadelphia School District. Immediately, the Trust, along with parents and community leaders, voiced opposition to marketing soda in the schools. Ultimately, the School Board rejected the Coca-Cola proposal for both health and fiscal reasons.

As a follow-up to the debate over the Coca-Cola contract, the School Board appointed a task force whose membership included the Trust, the Department of Health, teachers, administrators and parents. Based on nutritional standards developed by the task force, the School District conducted pilots in four schools in 2001-02, which proved to be very successful. In 2003, the Center for Disease Control gave the District a 3-year grant to study the project's impact on childhood obesity.

In early 2003, another exclusive beverage contract came up for consideration by the District. Under the leadership of the Trust, the Philadelphia Coalition for Healthy Children was formed to oppose the contract, which would have imposed no restrictions at all in the high schools and would have limited sugared drinks in elementary schools by only 50 percent. The Trust also surveyed parents in the District and found that 88 percent wanted only 100 percent juice and water in the schools.

At about the same time, New York City schools enacted a very strict snack and beverage policy. The Philadelphia effort was energized by the New York success. Sandy Sherman of The Food Trust explained: "If New York can do it, Philly can." Part of the attractiveness of the New York model was its track record of maintaining profits while pursuing a health-based policy. In response, the School District decided to adopt a beverage policy, leading to the February 4th decision.

Sherman points out that there is much more to be done. The Coalition is continuing to work with the School District to ensure that nutritional standards are met. Future plans include reviewing the District's snack policy.

Philadelphia is the 5th largest school district in the nation. If it can do it, so can other school districts. Sherman stresses the importance of forging partnerships among healthcare professionals, advocates, and parents. Get the facts and figures first and share concerns with the Food Service Director. Finally, make use of all available resources.