

Junk Food Junk Science Exposed

January 27, 2012 by [Sean Wajert](#)

Much of the litigation our clients confront on a daily basis seems predicated on the philosophy that all predicaments, all injuries, must be the fault of *someone else*. There is no such thing as personal responsibility; individuals need not face the consequences of choices they make. Why change your risky behavior when you can sue someone else for it?

This same approach is the foundation of the effort to remove all soda and so-called “junk foods” from our schools. But, is the mere availability of such products in schools actually the cause of childhood obesity -- certainly an important public health concern?

Readers may want to note a recent study published in the journal *Sociology of Education*. See VanHook & Altman, [Competitive Food Sales in Schools and Childhood Obesity: A Longitudinal Study](#), 85 *Sociology of Education* 23 (January 2012).

The study followed nearly 20,000 students who started kindergarten back in 1998. The researchers recorded the students' [BMI](#) (body mass index) in fifth grade and again in eighth grade, and correlated these data points with the availability of junk food at their schools (like snacks, candy, and soda). (The researchers did factor in race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other factors that might affect weight gain.)

Surprise, surprise? They found no link between children's weight and the sale of these foods in the nearly 1000 schools. About 1/3 were overweight in schools with and schools without. This actually makes complete sense, and follows on other studies that showed when students couldn't buy soda at school, they simply compensated by drinking more at home, before and after. See Taber, et al., [Banning All Sugar-Sweetened Beverages in Middle Schools](#), *Arch. Pediatr. Adolesc. Med.* 2011; 0: 20112001-7.

Bashing food companies may make some feel better, and banning sales in schools may allow some to pat themselves on the back for a job well done, but selling these foods in school has little or nothing to do with whether children will become overweight. The real issue is parental responsibility -- how, what, and how much parents are feeding their children at home; what eating patterns they instill, and what exercise parents encourage in their kids. Admittedly, changing parental behavior is a lot harder than banning the soda machine, but it is also the only approach likely to make a significant impact on this issue. Regulation and litigation are not the answers.