

Arkansas Seeks Vending Machine-Fat Link

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. - Gov. Mike Huckabee wants proof that vending machines lead to childhood obesity before the state restricts the machines in schools.

Huckabee, who has lost 105 pounds in the last year after a diabetes diagnosis, says he would like scientific evidence first before regulating vending machines out of Arkansas middle schools and high schools.

He suggests restricting vending machine use in a group of schools and comparing the data with schools where access to the machines is limited.

"There are no studies that I know that clearly say if a kid has access to a soda machine that he's going to be fatter than the one who doesn't have access," he said.

Standards that aim to cut children's calorie intake by putting restrictions on vending machines in Arkansas schools are to go before the state Board of Education in coming months.

Officials who fully support the standards, say Huckabee is being disingenuous for opposing them based on a lack of research.

"I think it's really pretty much a basic that candy bars and sugar colas are not conducive to good health," said Rep. Jay Bradford, D-White Hall. "And I don't think it takes a lot of research to realize that adds a great amount of weight to certain individuals."

Huckabee said the state needs to continue carefully and consider seriously the financial implications of the standards, which he said are headed in the right direction.

Financing hasn't escaped the worries of the Child Health Advisory Committee members, who realize they are proposing potentially expensive mandates. There is no estimate how much it will cost to implement the standards and no state funding has been allotted.

Huckabee's reluctance to fully support the standards comes one month after he announced his Healthy Arkansas campaign, which aims to reduce the percentage of obese children 5 percent by January 2007. Currently state statistics show that about 22 percent of about 277,000 Arkansas public school students are obese and another 18 percent are overweight.

If the state Education Board adopts the standards, they specifically would be keeping middle and high school students from accessing vending machine food until 30 minutes after the last lunch period ends.

That would take effect in the coming school year and by the 2005-2006 school year, the standards require foods and beverages sold in schools, including those from vending machines, to meet a short list of nutritional guidelines.

The Arkansas Soft Drink Association's position on the standards is the same as Huckabee's. "They don't have any evidence to offer," Dennis Farmer, the association's president, said. "They can't tell you what difference that's going to make in the obesity rate." Huckabee said suggesting he is aligned with the soda and vending machine industries is ridiculous. "I'm not running again," he said. "It doesn't matter to me."

However, Dr. James Fasules, a cardiologist with Arkansas Children's Hospital and a member of the Child Health Advisory Committee, wonders whether Huckabee is stalling. "It's easy to call for a study. It's a very nice way of delaying things," Fasules said. But the governor disagrees.

"We may come back and decide that these recommendations don't go far enough," Huckabee said. "If people are saying I'm trying to delay or thwart it, that's not it at all."