

Gov. Signs Bans on School Junk Food

By Nancy Vogel

With an increasing percentage of California children overweight and out of shape, the state's famously fit governor ignored his business allies Thursday and signed bills to eliminate the most fattening, sugary foods from public schools.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the bills after walking a kilometer -- 0.62 of a mile -- with bicycle racing champion Lance Armstrong and hundreds of schoolchildren to kick off a daylong obesity summit organized by First Lady Maria Shriver.

Despite opposition from the California Chamber of Commerce -- a generous financial backer whose veto recommendations the governor followed closely last year -- Schwarzenegger signed bills to ban the sale of sodas in high schools and set fat, sugar and calorie standards for all food, except cafeteria lunches, sold in public schools.

The bills eventually could change the culinary landscape of public schools as they take effect in 2007. The delayed implementation is meant to give schools time to find replacement foods and end or change existing contracts with soda companies.

In school vending machines, yogurt, nuts and milk will replace candy bars, chips and colas, while super-size muffins may make way for pizza slices with whole wheat crust and low-fat cheese. Even the giant candy bars sold for band and sport team fundraisers will be banished from campuses during the school day if they fail to meet fat, sugar and calorie standards.

"One out of three kids, one of four teenagers, is overweight or at risk," Schwarzenegger said minutes before he signed the bills as hundreds of conferees at Cal Expo, the state fairgrounds, watched.

"This leads to major medical problems like diabetes, heart disease, sleep disorders, depression, and it robs our kids of a healthy childhood," he said.

Schwarzenegger challenged the business, health and government leaders who were attending the summit to help parents by making nutritious food and exercise opportunities more readily available.

The bills, by Sen. Martha Escutia (D-Whittier), won support from doctors and school nutritionists. Opposition came from candy makers and the state Chamber of Commerce, which argued that the causes of obesity were more complex than school restrictions could fix.

The Grocery Manufacturers of America also weighed in against the bills, arguing that legislation "will do nothing to motivate students, parents or communities to take the steps necessary to improve their overall health."

When Schwarzenegger, a world-champion bodybuilder before his acting and political careers, sought months ago to sponsor the soda bill, Escutia said, she warned him,

“You’re going to have to say no to Coke and Pepsi, and at the high school level it’s even more difficult because some people think that high school kids actually should have choice.”

“To the governor’s credit,” Escutia said, “he told me, ‘If you want to climb up the mountain, I’ll climb up with you.’ ”

Armstrong, who has won seven consecutive Tour de France titles, introduced the governor at the obesity conference, saying, “This is not just a shallow, hollow policy. This is something that is near and dear to his heart and near and dear to mine.”

California is joining more than a dozen other states this year in passing legislation or regulations to make food in schools more nutritious. Momentum for such a change built quickly as public health officials warned of a childhood obesity epidemic.

Last week the nonprofit California Center for Public Health Advocacy released a study showing that 28% of California’s children are overweight and that in some communities the rate tops 40%.

Federal nutrition standards already cover the lunches that most public schools serve.

But states have been cracking down lately on what school officials call “competitive foods” sold in vending machines, school stores and cafeteria a la carte lines, where students can buy single items rather than a square meal.

The bills signed into law Thursday put California in the top tier of states with the toughest junk food restrictions, said Erik Peterson, spokesman for the School Nutrition Assn., a nonprofit group that represents school food service officials and companies that sell foods to schools.

California school nutritionists find the laws “very doable,” said Marty Marshall, legislation chairwoman with the California School Nutrition Assn.

“We won’t be selling 10-ounce burritos at 700 calories and shouldn’t be,” she said.

Escutia’s bill, SB 12, will restrict school snacks to foods with no more than 35% of calories derived from fat, no more than 10% of calories derived from saturated fat and no more than 35% of the total weight from sugar, with no more than 250 calories.

Entree items like pizza, burritos, pasta and sandwiches must contain no more than 4 grams of fat for every 100 calories, with a total of no more than 400 calories.

Escutia’s soda bill, SB 965, would -- starting in 2007 -- gradually impose on high schools a restriction on the sale of sodas already in place at elementary and middle schools.

Neither of the laws would affect the kind of food and drinks students can bring from home or what is served or sold at school-sponsored events, like football games and dances, after school hours.

A third bill signed by Schwarzenegger, SB 281 by Sen. Abel Maldonado (R-Santa Maria), will earmark \$18.2 million to reimburse schools for buying fruits and vegetables for school snacks and breakfasts.

Priority for the money is given to fresh produce grown in California, but the bill

allows reimbursement to schools for the purchase of salsa, raisins, canned fruit, dried peas and other processed foods, including those grown outside the state.

Exactly how the money will be distributed has yet to be determined by state education, health services and agriculture officials.

Though Schwarzenegger indicated his support months ago for Escutia's bills, many Republicans opposed them in the Legislature, particularly the soda bill.

"I think there was concern about local control and leaving it up to school districts," said Assemblyman Keith Richman (R-Northridge), the Legislature's only physician. He voted for the bills and joined Schwarzenegger for the bill signing. Richman said the Los Angeles Unified School District already had adopted similar soda and nutrition standards.

"Some of us felt that this was of statewide concern and needed to be addressed as a statewide issue," he said.