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# **Is junk food really banned in elementary schools or have we been had, again?**

**By Carlo Ricci**

1600 words

On October 20, 2004 the Ontario Ministry of Education released Policy/Program Memorandum No. 135. One goal of this policy is to play a “significant role in the prevention of obesity and such chronic diseases as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer” (Ministry of education, 2004b). I believe most of us would agree that this is possible through good nutrition, and so most of us would applaud a move toward good nutrition and good food choices for children in elementary schools as a positive step and an ethically necessary step.

A quick search of the Ontario government’s newswire brings up releases and headlines that are laudable and impressive; however, are these headlines meant to express the reality of what is happening in schools or are they merely meant to create grand mythological fictions ingrained not in reality but in the quest to gain more votes? One release reads as follows: ‘Healthy Foods in Schools Means Healthier Kids’ (Ministry of Education, 2004a). It goes on to discuss the importance of eating nutritious food and outlines the government’s plan to help elementary schools become healthier places for our children. So what is this grandiose plan that will make children healthier, and because of its strategic well thought out plan, will help these same children lead more nutritious lives as adults? Being able to make children healthier now and in the future when they are

adults is a grand claim that clearly would require a grand plan. So again, what is this master plan?

Now, the misinformation about food being banned in elementary schools may, in part, be created by the media but the misinformation was and is allowed to continue without any government official stepping up to clarify the policy. Let me explain: The headlines around the province screamed the word ban. After reading and listening to the headlines the message I got was that the Ontario Ministry was banning junk food from elementary schools. This message was one that I believed to be true until a couple of weeks ago when I spoke to a few people from the ministry, some of whom were involved in this process, and straightened me out. I could not be blamed for believing that junk food is banned in schools since this is how the message is being filtered out. Here are some examples of newspaper headlines that support the misinformation I was getting:

Junk food ban, fitness plan good first steps; [Final Edition]

Niagara Falls Review. Niagara Falls, Ont.: Oct 27, 2004. p. A.4

Schools banish junk food; [Final Edition]

Neil Bowen. Observer. Sarnia, Ont.: Oct 27, 2004. p. B.1.Fro

Junk food ban the first step; [Final Edition]

Examiner. Barrie, Ont.: Oct 22, 2004. p. A.4

Boards say junk food ban easy to swallow; [Final Edition]

Michael Purvis. Sault Star. Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.: Oct 22, 2004. p. A.3

Junk food ban a start; [Final Edition]

Tribune. Welland, Ont.: Oct 22, 2004. p. A.6

Ontario halts junk food sales in schools.:

Lee Greenberg, with file from Jim Beatty. CanWest News. Don Mills, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. 1

Schools served junk food ban: C-K public board complied before deadline; [Final Edition]

Chris McGregor. Chatham Daily News. Chatham, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. 2

No junk food for junior: Provincial ban meant to improve fitness; [Final Edition]

Daily Press. Timmins, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.5

Junk food barred from schools: Ban affects students in kindergarten to Grade 8; [Final Edition]

Examiner. Barrie, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.1.Fro

Ban junk food from schools: Kennedy; [Final Edition]

Cassandra Szklarski. Expositor. Brantford, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.6

Ontario bans chips, sweets at schools; [Final Edition]

Lee Greenberg. Kingston Whig - Standard. Kingston, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. 11.Fron

Pop, chips banned from schools; [Final Edition]

North Bay Nugget. North Bay, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.4

Gov't bans junk food in elementary schools; [Final Edition]

Peterborough Examiner. Peterborough, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.2

Ontario moves to ban junk food in schools; [Final Edition]

Sault Star. Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.10

Ontario bans junk food in elementary schools; [Final Edition]

Standard. St. Catharines, Ont.: Oct 21, 2004. p. A.9

I think you get the message. There are more examples but I will leave that to the interested reader to research. So where did I get the idea that junk food is banned from elementary schools?! Now, I am not alone in this mistaken belief; in fact, I have talked to many teachers and principals that are just as misinformed as I was and therefore this confusion inspired me to write this clarifying paper. I want to set the record straight on this: **JUNK FOOD IS NOT BANNED FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO**. I surveyed a number of teachers in my graduate classes since the “ban” that is not a ban came into effect and they all believed that there was a ban and they all shared how they broke the ban or witnessed it being broken in their schools. For instance, in one class that I taught comprised of 20 graduate students with 11 working in elementary schools shared how they supplied their children with junk food either as treats to reward good behaviour, at parties that included junk food, for Halloween and so on. So, the teachers and principals that I spoke to mistakenly believed that there was a ban and they chose to ignore the “ban” which, it turns out, is not a ban at all.

If it is not a ban then what is it?

If you read Policy/Program Memorandum No. 135 it reads, in part, as follows: “The purpose of this memorandum is to set out clear, recommended standards for school boards, in response to request for direction, regarding the sale of foods and beverages through vending machines in elementary schools...Effective immediately, school boards should restrict the sale of all food and beverage items in elementary school vending machines to those that are healthy and nutritious, in accordance with the recommended standards set out in this memorandum” (Ministry of education, 2004b). From this it becomes clear that junk food is not banned in elementary schools, but only in elementary

school VENDING MACHINES. This means that tuck shops, parties that include junk foods, the sale of junk food to students to fundraise, children bringing in their own junk foods from home and so on are not banned. In another class, one graduate student, for example shared with me how his daughter who is in grade 8 was given a form at school that asked her to pick food from the following choices: for \$5.00 the student would get one meal choice, one drink and a Popsicle. Under meals the student could circle one of the following: 1 piece of fish and chips; grilled cheese and chips; hamburger and chips; 3 chicken strips and chips; 2 pieces of fish and chips; hotdog and chips; poutine; 4 pieces chicken nuggets and chips. Under drinks the student could choose Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Gingerale, water, root beer, Orange, Pepsi, Diet Pepsi. This is permissible under the current policy because the policy only included vending machines. And so, clearly, unhealthy foods continue to be a mainstream of elementary schools.

Another issue is whether the foods and the nutritional requirements of the approved foods in the vending machines are truly healthy and nutritional alternatives. I would argue that they are not, but will leave it someone else to explain why.

The government through the policy recognizes that simply having nutritional foods available as an option is not enough. In effect, they are contradicting earlier statements about the effectiveness of this policy. They write:

As Dietitians of Canada concludes in its report, when nutritionally inadequate foods are available and promoted at school every day, even along with healthier foods, it becomes increasingly difficult for students to have a healthy diet. Studies show that it is more effective to offer only healthy foods and beverages so that

students do not have to make choices between nutritious and nutritionally inadequate foods and beverages. (Ministry of Education, 2004b)

In essence, they are admitting that limiting the ban of unhealthy foods only in vending machine will not work.

Although a hard ban on unhealthy foods may be the only option that will ensure the greatest success in the shortest period of time, it would clearly not be without controversy. For example, Lingren (2004) writes, “One year into its mandate, Ontario's Liberal government has banned junk food from schools, made pit bulls illegal and outlawed smoking in all public and workplaces, prompting critics to fume about the imposition of a ‘nanny state.’” Although, as we have seen, Lingren is incorrect in saying that the government has banned junk food in elementary schools, the controversy that would result if they did still remains. As well, others will argue that externally forcing someone to do something is ultimately not as effective as getting people to make choices because they are internally motivated to do so.

In conclusion, junk food has not been banned in Ontario’s elementary schools and we should not pretend otherwise.

#### References

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