

News from Hungary

by Andras Nagy

The fight against childhood obesity in Hungary

The dangers of the growing epidemic of childhood obesity are being more widely recognised in Hungary. Food in schools is the area currently being addressed by organisations promoting action to deal with this threat to children's health.

Studying school vending machines

This year many promising developments occurred in the regulation of school canteens and vending machines. KOTHALO (www.kothalo.hu), a network of civil society organisations that promotes environmental protection, issued an important guideline for ecological consumer protection in the schools that dealt extensively with the effects of advertisements on children and aspects of children's consumer behaviour in school kiosks earlier. This year KOTHALO released the results of a study conducted on vending machines in 630 schools. In 53% of the larger schools there is at least one machine. Most school directors are not aware of the dangers of these machines to education about healthy lifestyles. Vendors in some smaller locations even managed to convince municipalities to instruct school directors to accept the machines. However, in some cases, parental organisations have successfully prevented the deployment of vending machines. There is very little regulation of the products sold through the machines. Most experts agree that vending machines may not be the most important contributors to children's obesity, but the present product selections diminish the positive messages of an education in healthy eating. Nevertheless, the canteen issue is far from over as the hot summer is likely to be followed by a heated autumn. The government plans to launch two regulations to set a standard for school canteens and to control the content of vending machines in schools.

Possible regulations concerning foods in schools

In the early spring the Ministry of Education disclosed its agenda to regulate the availability of food products in schools. Initially the government planned more radical steps to regulate foods on offer in the school canteens by a compulsory directive. This announcement sparked an intense debate throughout the media and professional

organisations. EFOSZ – the Federation of Hungarian Food Industries – was the organisation that raised most concerns (www.efosz.hu). In the summer EFOSZ contracted a public relations agency to coordinate the publicity work on the "kiosk issue". Earlier the agency had successfully launched a website called "Sweet Facts" that promotes confectionery and sweets. EFOSZ argued that the differentiation between "healthy" and "unhealthy" foods is inappropriate as these terms are relevant only for the whole diet. They also stated the virtue of "freedom of choice", where all kinds of products are available to consumers. In this context the scarcity of "healthy" food products in school kiosks was due to the preferences of the consumers, they argued. However, the industry representatives expressed their willingness to better inform students and the general public about up-to-date nutritional principles and also to promote a physically more active lifestyle. The industry opts for self-regulation instead of any type of ban. Minister of Education Bálint Magyar pointed in his response to concerns from the industry that "limitation of the present offer may also be regarded as an opportunity for an expansion of product range if the industry recognises the new demand of one million consumers in schools." In May, the Office of the Public Health Commissioner, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education jointly issued a call for competition for the title of "Children Friendly Canteen". Schools that wish to apply must follow the guidelines of the National Institute for Food Safety and Nutrition (OETI), implementing the recommendations not only in school canteens but in vending machines and school catering. As Commissioner Kökény stated, "Schools must become promoters of health". In one Budapest school, where the new recommendations were readily