

EAST VALLEY VOICE



TOM HORNE
COMMENTARY

Let schools stop pushing junk food

In its Friday editorial, the Tribune criticized me for promoting a ban on junk food in Arizona schools.

One of the points made was that there is a list of tasks to improve education, and this is a waste of energy. As the Tribune and its readers know, I have a large number of initiatives on which I am working very hard to increase academic standards in Arizona. Pursuing those, and the healthy foods initiative, are not mutually exclusive. I was going to say that we have to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time, but decided I needed a better metaphor.

I see this as a matter of parental choice. Some parents don't care if their children eat nothing but sugared soda and a candy bar for lunch. They are free to put those items in the lunch box.

But most parents do care. Most parents work hard to teach their children about healthy eating, and they resent being undermined by the schools pushing sugar and saturated fat on their children in order to make money. What perverted values!

Imagine giving a teenager a spoon and telling him to eat 10 teaspoons of sugar. He would say, "Ugh." But that is what is mixed in a can of sugared soda.

Students are in the years when their bodies are flexible and growing. Parents want them to grow up with strong bones and healthy bodies. They want them to develop healthy eating habits for life. In class, the teaching of nutrition standards reinforces this desire by the parents. But then, in an act of horrendous hypocrisy, the schools are pushing great gobs of sugar and saturated fat on the same students, in order to make money on them.

We have attracted national attention because we did not just propose legislation, as some other states have done. Rather, we conducted a scientific study first to demonstrate that the schools could make just as much money with healthy foods in the vending machines, such as bottled water, juice, low fat milk, yogurt, granola bars, etc.

A study of eight schools showed that they made just as much money, and some schools actually had an increase in revenues. We summarize this as, "If you sell it, they will buy it."

There is no longer any conceivable justification for the schools to be pushing sugar and saturated fat on the students. But the heavy presence at the Legislature has been the relevant industries, rather than parents.

Parents need to contact their legislators. If the Legislature would represent the interests of the parents, rather than that of the soda and vending industries, what a sweet thing it would be.

Tom Horne is state superintendent of public instruction.