

THE ART OF RESEARCH

Sales and advertising of Coca-Cola products continue despite the company's pledge

Voluntary action will not regulate the sale of sugary beverages in schools. Policy action is needed.



Agnes Erzse is a researcher in nutrition-related noncommunicable diseases at PRICELESS SA.

As schools start the new year, parents would like to know that they are sending their children off to a supportive and healthy environment. Childhood obesity in South Africa is more than double the global average of 6%, and the food environment at schools plays a significant role in this.

South African children are constantly exposed to unhealthy foods and aggressive marketing at schools. In response to national calls for reduced sugar intake, Coca-Cola Beverages SA announced in July 2017 that they would replace sugar-sweetened products with no- or low-calorie drinks and remove branding and advertising from primary schools.

Researchers from Wits University studied the food and drinks environment in fee and non-fee primary schools in Gauteng. Fieldworkers visited 108 school tuck shops and other food outlets in 2019 to find out what was being advertised and sold to children.

Two years after Coca-Cola's announcement, over half of the schools sold and/or advertised sugary Coca-Cola products. Over half (53%) of the tuck shops with sugary Coca-Cola products also sold diet alternatives. However, no school tuck shop was found that did not sell sugary Coca-Cola and sold diet alternatives exclusively.

"School children are continually exposed to sugary drinks and their advertisements, despite the pledge," says Agnes Erzse. "School principals have little awareness of the pledge, and with the financial pressure on



Regulatory action is needed to prevent marketing and sale of sugary beverages at schools

them, they must sell products that generate revenue."

Government departments must take regulatory action, rather than relying on voluntary strategies.

"Without statutory changes to the food environment in schools, children will continue to be at risk of becoming obese as adults," says Erzse.



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