April 20, 2006

Committee on Nutrition Standards for Food in Schools
Institute of Medicine
500 Fifth Street, N.W.
Washington DC  20001

Dear Committee Member:

As you know, water is the indispensable beverage and is adequate for meeting the hydration needs of most people. For athletes engaged in continuous, high-intensity aerobic workouts that last for 60 minutes or more, sports drinks are an option for preventing dehydration and restoring fluids, electrolytes, and nutrients. Since most students do not participate in 60-minute high-intensity workouts during school hours, we encourage your committee to recommend that sports drinks not be sold or served in schools during the school day.

The American College of Sports Medicine’s position on “Exercise and Fluid Replacement” states that “[d]uring exercise lasting less than one hour, there is little evidence of physiological or physical performance differences between consuming a carbohydrate-electrolyte drink and plain water.”¹ Even so, sports drinks are marketed heavily to non-athletes, for whom the beverages confer no nutritional (or performance) advantages. In addition, the acid in sports drinks can erode dental enamel.²,³

Some school officials have viewed sports drinks as healthier alternatives to soft drinks. Though sports drinks are lower in calories, they are similar to diluted soft drinks. While an average 20-oz. cola soft drink contains 220 calories, a typical 20-oz. sports drink contains 160 calories.⁴ The main ingredients in sports drinks include water, sugar (high-fructose corn syrup), and salt.

Children are over-consuming added sugars. According to the USDA Food Guide (based on estimated calorie, nutrient, and food group requirements and estimated discretionary calorie allowances), the estimated maximum added sugars allowance for 4-18 year old girls is 16 to 48 grams a day.⁵ The average 6-11 year old (boy or girl) consumes 92 grams a day of added sugars.⁶ The average 12-17 year old girl consumes 96 grams a day of added sugars.⁷ The estimated maximum added sugars allowance for 4-18 year old boys is between 16 to 96 grams per day. The average 12-17 year old boy consumes 140 grams a day of sugars.⁸

Furthermore, the Dietary Reference Intake for sodium for children (depending upon their age) is no more than 1,500 mg to 2,300 mg of sodium a day.⁹ However, between 75% and 91% of children (depending upon their age) consume more than 2,300 mg of sodium a day.¹⁰ A 20-oz. bottle of Gatorade contains approximately 275 mg of sodium.

Recently, the sale of sports drinks in schools has increased dramatically, more than any other category of beverage. According to the American Beverage Association, the purchase of sports drinks in schools increased by 70% (from 7.8% to 16.3% of total sales) between 2002 and 2004.¹¹ During the same period, the purchase of carbonated soft drinks in schools decreased by 24%. It seems that soft drinks are being replaced, at least in part, by sports drinks in schools.
In conclusion, while sports drinks may be appropriate for elite athletes, such as marathon runners and triathletes, they are not appropriate for schoolchildren. We respectfully urge the committee to recommend that sports drinks not be sold or served in schools during the school day.

Sincerely,

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Center for Informed Food Choices
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Collaborative Center for Justice, Inc.
End Hunger Connecticut! Inc.
FamilyCook Productions
The Food Trust
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HealthyPlanet
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Institute for America’s Health
Kids First
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Muskegon Community Health Project
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National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Bridgeport Section
National Research Center for Women & Families
New York City Nutrition Education Network
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Operation Wellness
Prevention Institute
Preventive Cardiovascular Nurses Association
Rhode Island Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance
Shape Up America!
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Sustainable Food Systems, LLC
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