

Schools worry about kids downing energy drinks

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In Hillsborough, the middle school principal recently barred 1,250 students from gulping energy drinks on school grounds. In Manville, the high school sent home a letter urging parents to be vigilant about the amount of caffeine and other stimulants in energy drinks.

And after watching an energy-drink commercial that alluded to cocaine use, a state assemblyman vowed to ban companies using such marketing tactics from doing business in New Jersey and to mandate that all state schools teach students about caffeine.

Energy drinks, which pack several bursts of caffeine in every can, increasingly are purchased by a younger clientele. But outright bans such as the one at the Somerset County middle school seem to be rare in New Jersey -- not to mention elsewhere.

"The question was 'Should we be allowing them to drink them?'" said Hillsborough Middle School principal Joseph Trybulski, who imposed the ban in April after teachers observed students regularly downing the drinks before school and during lunch. "It was unanimous. Nobody thought kids should be drinking them."

Frank Belluscio, a spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said he wasn't aware of districts or schools in the state that had banned the drinks. Neither did Lynne Richmond, spokeswoman for the state Department of Agriculture, which oversees school lunch programs in New Jersey.

"If schools are going above and beyond our guidelines, that is entirely a district issue," Richmond said. "But I have not heard of (energy-drink bans) myself in New Jersey."

Craig Stevens, a spokesman for the American Beverage Association, argued the energy drinks are designated for adults. According to the Washington-based trade organization, a standard soft drink carries about 3.75 milligrams of caffeine per ounce, while energy drinks have 10 milligrams and coffee has about 20 milligrams.

"They're for people who can afford the \$2 or \$3 cost of an energy drink, people who actually have jobs," Stevens said. "They're not marketed in schools."

However, they remain popular among students, and school districts are responding.

Since 2004, athletes at high schools in Fairfax County, Va., have been barred from consuming energy drinks. Five high schools in a Colorado Springs, Colo., district banned the beverages last year, when two of its high school students who drank Spike Shooter were hospitalized. And school board members in Broward County, Fla., mulled similar restrictions this year after four middle-school students landed in the emergency room after downing the energy and weight-loss drink Redline.

School administrators say children don't need chemical enhancers. Instead they encourage adequate rest, healthy diets and exercise to boost energy naturally. Energy drinks -- which emerged on the beverage scene about 20 years ago -- not only contain caffeine but also sugar and other ingredients such as the Chinese herb ginseng and guarana -- a plant native to South America whose extracts can contain caffeine.

"We started to notice here that the kids were coming into school a little bit hyper," said Manville High School principal Mary McLoughlin. "When we asked them what's going on, they would say 'I didn't have breakfast, but I had an energy drink.'"

Riva Touger-Decker, a professor and chairwoman of the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, said excess caffeine can lead to insomnia, restlessness, increased heart palpitations, elevated blood pressure and possible obesity and dental damage from the sugar. Relying on energy drinks for hydration also can lead children away from healthy drinks such as water and milk.

A recent survey conducted by a UMDNJ graduate student that gauged caffeine use among high school juniors and seniors in a central Jersey district showed 64 percent of students reported consuming some form of the stimulant every day, and about 22 percent of the total 270 surveyed said they imbibed energy drinks daily, Touger-Decker said.

Though academic studies on energy drinks are limited, one report that surveyed nearly 800 undergraduates found those who consumed energy drinks were more likely to dabble in risky sexual acts, excessive drinking and violent behavior. The report was published in the March issue of the Journal of American College Health.

"If kids are drinking a lot of energy drinks, they can monitor them closely for other problem behaviors," said Kathleen Miller, a research scientist at the Research Institute on Addiction at the University of Buffalo in New York, who authored the report. "It can be a good warning sign."

Concern over the drinks -- which ring up \$6 billion in annual sales in the United States, according to industry experts -- also spread to Trenton, prompting Assemblyman Ralph Caputo to propose legislation that would bar companies that market energy drinks by referencing drugs or alcohol. Meanwhile, school districts in the state would be required to educate children on caffeine abuse, according to the bill.

"I think if they have concrete evidence that these drinks are distracting students, they should be banned," said Hillsborough eighth-grader Scott Cesta. "But you can't control what kids eat or do."

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