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# The junk food smugglers

By Brendan O'Neill

**The drive to promote healthy eating in schools is giving rise to an unexpected black market in junk food among children who are refusing to change their eating habits.**



Fans of Just William and Grange Hill's Pogo Patterson might be forgiven for thinking the clock had been turned back to a more innocent era.

While knives, drugs and alcopops in schools may be grabbing the headlines these days, the emerging market in classroom contraband is altogether more surprising: chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks.

Enterprising children have always found a way around school bans - from cigarettes to catapults - and their trading patch has tended to be out of sight, behind the bike sheds.

Now, as the government's crackdown on unhealthy eating in schools begins to bite, those with an eye for a quick profit are most likely to be hawking Mars bars, salt 'n' vinegar snacks and Coke (the fizzy, sugary variety that is).

Ring leaders are buying bars of chocolate and packets of crisps in bulk, and making small profits by surreptitiously selling on to sugar-craving classmates.

"You can get a good deal from the boys selling sweets," says a 16-year-old pupil at a respectable comprehensive in south London. "They sell them cheaper than the tuck shop used to."

**“ Even if the school started selling these things again, we'd still buy from these boys as they're not so expensive ”**

16-year-old school girl

She claims that three boys in her year are selling junk food to fellow pupils. And it seems that they are cartelising the market: one boy sells crisps, another chocolate, and the third sweets - "chewy sweets and hard sweets and things like that," says the pupil, who asked not to be identified.

"Our school has a healthy eating policy, so the shop and the canteen stopped selling crisps and things. Not long after, these three boys kind of took things over. Now we all know where to go if we want something like that to eat."

To avoid detection, the boys deal their goods from their schoolbags, in the toilets or in the furthest reaches of the playground, she says.

## Oliver's efforts

The pupil says they buy their products from wholesalers, which means they can sell them very cheaply.

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"Their chocolate bars are only 30p and crisps are 20p. Even if the school started selling these things again, me and my friends would still buy from these boys, because they're not so expensive."



Pogo Patterson, the original junk food smuggler

The headmaster is "shocked" to hear about the existence of this playground black market, says his secretary. But he has no further comment.

But his is not the only school and it is not hard to see how such small, word-of-mouth black markets in junk food could emerge.

Over the past year, especially following the Channel 4 series *Jamie's School Dinners*, in which celebrity chef Jamie Oliver exposed the poor quality food being dished up to kids, many schools have made moves to outlaw junk food.

Fizzy drink vending machines have been removed, and tuck shops have withdrawn crisps and chocolate from sale. Last week it was announced that health campaigners and MPs want to give local authorities the right to stop ice-cream vans from pulling up outside schools.

### McDonald's runs

Former Education Secretary Ruth Kelly announced last year plans to ban the sale of certain junk foods to schoolchildren.

School governors who continue to allow such food once the ban comes into force will, she said, be "open to the same sanctions as anyone else who breaks the law".



Not all kids are happy to swallow Jamie Oliver's rhetoric

At a school in north-west London, a 17-year-old sixth-form pupil says some children at his school, in lower years, are selling soft drink cans from their schoolbags.

He asks not to be identified and talks on condition that the name of his school is not publicised.

"The food available in the canteen is limited to jacket potatoes or pasta," says the boy, who gets around the rules by organising regular lunchtime car trips to McDonald's or Subway.

"Driving off the premises means we can have sugary or fatty alternatives to the food they serve in school.

"At the moment there is no form of junk food available in school. The soft drinks machines were taken out a couple of years ago and were replaced with bottled water machines and some tripe about water being proven to 'make students concentrate more in class'."

His car trips are proving popular. Numerous students take part, looking to buy something "more edible and tasty" than the healthy food served in the school canteen, he says.

In the United States too, black markets are emerging in schools that have outlawed junk food. Jennifer Obakhume, a senior student at Inglewood High School in California,

investigated the phenomenon for American Youth Radio at the end of last year.

"Students buy huge variety boxes of candy or crisps, and then sell their supplies," says Ms Obakhume. "You've got to see it to believe it. Seniors who get out at noon throw fast food over campus gates to friends."



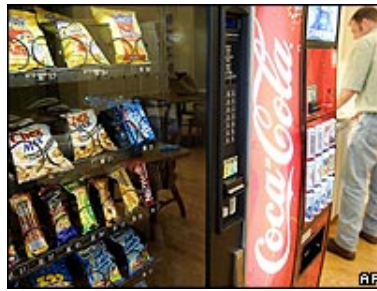
"It's a big order - you ready?"

In some West Coast schools, she says, teachers and administrators are starting to crack down on the "underground food trade" and are suspending students "as if it were drug dealing".

### Lunchbox contraband

Mick Brookes, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), is not surprised to hear of junk-food rackets in British schools.

Indeed, he predicted something like this would happen. In a speech at the NAHT annual conference a couple of weeks ago he criticised the regime of "gastronomic Puritanism" being imposed on schools, and said it would lead to a situation where children would bring in "lunchboxes full of contraband".



Banned from UK and US schools

"If we want children to eat healthier foods, we need to educate their palates rather than going for coercion, regulation and insistence," he says.

"There is a long history which shows that if you make something out of bounds for children, you only make it more attractive."

John Dunford of the Association of School and College Leaders says the black markets show "that the business and enterprise curriculum is making more impact than the food curriculum".

Perhaps the solution is to be more relaxed about what children eat. If we provide them with a hot healthy school dinner, does it really matter if they have a bag of crisps or bar of chocolate as an additional snack?

It seems that they will anyway, even (or especially) if we tell them not to.

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### Add your comments on this story, using the form below.

When I was at primary school, the toilet paper was that horrible thick, green, rough paper, that everybody remembers and hates. My Mum and Dad were confused when the toilet rolls at home were disappearing at an alarming rate. They eventually found out I was selling pieces of the roll at school - 10p a go.

**Chris, UK**

Has anyone been brave enough to try the 'legalisation' route? I know a family where a large bowl of chocolates is permanently on the coffee table and the kids rarely touch it. They prefer a yoghurt. Now when their friends come round, that's a different matter.

**Cooka, Switzerland**

I don't think the problem is the food, it's the levels of inactivity in today's youth. There was no problem with what we ate when I was at school because I didn't spend all my spare time in front of either the TV or a computer game. And how can a ban on selling junk food to kids either work or be rational? "I'll have a Big Mac please." "Got any ID?" Talk about Nanny state.

**Duncan Paine, Preston UK**

There is an African saying which says the great way to educate the nation is to educate the mother - in this case the parents. Forbidden fruits are the sweetest.

**Inno Jokonya, Preston**

The kids aren't just choosing to eat junk food - they are choosing to avoid or add to a diet which they feel is boring and/or restrictive. The answer is to get kids cooking again - bring back Home Economics instead of Food Science, let them cook for themselves from time to time (parents - please try this at home). Then they might appreciate the work put into school dinners, and actually bother to eat them. Or where dinners are really awful, they would be able to make a reasoned argument for improvement.

**Isobel, Salisbury UK**

My husband is fond of telling our children about being paid by fellow pupils to eat their vegetables and the money he made from this, he spent on sweets which he sold to his friends for a profit.

**Jasmine, Peterborough**

In a strange kind of a way I'm heartened by the initiative and opportunity that these modern day junior spivs are demonstrating. Of course we all want young people to eat more healthily, but exercise is also vital, and who knows perhaps these young entrepreneurs get their exercise by unloading their confectionary supplies from the warehouse.

**Jonno, Newark**

This just emphasises how important it is to turn up the education of our children in nutrition. The ban on it's own won't get the job done.

**Simon, Birmingham**

I left high school three years ago and the "healthy option" (ie the only things not swimming in fat) was two (yes, two in a school of 2000) salads made out of very old ingredients and twice as expensive. Eating habits are not going to change overnight. The key to this is advertising. Does David Beckham advertise fruit - no, he advertises a soft drinks. Parents also have a roll to play in this. Cut the sweets out and, for the love of God, cook vegetables properly - don't boil them to death.

**Alex J, Stratford upon Avon UK**

I ran just such a business at my secondary school in Hertfordshire in 1973-1974. There are no original sins.

**Ian Anderson**

I've taught in schools where there has been a ban on junk food. What happens is that the kids jump over the fence and head straight for the local shop. It's pointless having a healthy eating message at school if it's not reinforced at home. It's not surprising kids are smuggling stuff in if they don't fancy carrots are break time.

**Steve Reynolds, Southampton, UK**

Prohibition doesn't work, part 3,100,785.

**Chandra, London, England**

This shows the ignorance that is all too common when it comes to the effects of healthy eating. I grew up in a home where nothing was deep fried, we had brown bread, brown rice and plenty of veg. This has enabled me to realise that the better

the fuel you put in the better the machine will work. Jamie showed good food doesn't have to be boring and he got through to many parents and officials. It would seem though that the kids still don't see the link.

**R J A Swinton, Hawick, Scotland**

Back in the late 80s I used to buy up to £5 worth of sweets each morning from a very cheap sweet shop and resell them to my mates making at least £1 a day. My potential profits were only hampered by how much I could carry on me without being noticed. I even approached the headmaster about opening an official tuck shop and offering a share of the profits to the school but was told no as the school had a healthy eating policy.

**Simon Fisher, Bedford, England**

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