

Putnam: School Vending Machines Too Sweet

By *MICHAEL PELTIER*

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TALLAHASSEE | Florida Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam said Wednesday he may shut down or restrict the use of vending machines in public schools in response to what he says is a public health epidemic of obesity that left unchecked will cost the state millions in health care costs.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, Putnam said he hopes Gov. Rick Scott will assist him in that endeavor by signing into law a proposal (SB 1312) to transfer the oversight of school nutritional programs to the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The bill was passed by both chambers but has yet to be presented to Gov. Rick Scott.

With obesity on the rise, Putnam believes the bill will give him the authority to place tighter constraints on what schools offer students to eat and drink. Such oversight includes school lunch menus and private vending companies that vie for access to the relatively captive audience.

"I'm not opposed to doing what it takes to improve the quality and nutritional value of what our kids have to eat, recognizing that the policy for a high school student would be different than for an elementary school student," Putnam said.

Putnam's biggest challenge may be the schools themselves. Vending machines and fast food vendors have become increasingly common on school campuses as administrators have come to rely on the revenue they bring in.

Putnam said he plans to take aim at vending machines that now compete with more nutritional options by restricting what types of food those machines can offer or allowing them to be used only during part of the day.

The commissioner, however, said he's not inclined to shut them down completely.

"Before I come in here swinging a big axe saying I'm going to ban this or I'm going to ban that, I'm going to start by saying it is my personal commitment that ... we will improve the number of servings of fresh fruits and vegetables that these kids have and the nutritional value of that meal," he said.

Putnam said the vending machine issue is just the first in a series of initiatives to make school a healthy place. He may also seek changes from fast-food companies that provide food to students on campus in an attempt to curb an increase in overweight kids.

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