**Ban On Chocolate Milk In Schools Heads To Malloy**

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HARTFORD — Got chocolate milk? In Connecticut's schools, the answer might soon be "no."

An education bill passed by the legislature effectively prohibits chocolate milk from being served in school cafeterias. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy still must decide whether to sign the measure into law.

The ban would make Connecticut the first state in the nation to eliminate chocolate milk from all its schools. Some dietitians worry that it will have the unintended consequence of reducing key nutrients in kids' diets.

Trish Molloy, president of the School Nutrition Association of Connecticut, said Thursday that the provision relating to chocolate milk was "put in inadvertently" at the last minute and that the resulting ban on chocolate milk was unintended. The provision was part of an omnibus education bill, passed on the final night of the legislative session, that made technical changes to the state's education laws.

Molloy said that her group was working with state education officials and the governor's staff to figure out whether the language can be clarified.

According to Molloy, asking the governor to veto the bill and the legislature to pass a revised version next year "is certainly a question" that's being reviewed.

The bill's section on school lunches is intended to cut back on fat and sodium in drinks served to school kids as a way of attacking the childhood obesity epidemic. A spokesman for Malloy declined to comment on whether the governor was considering a veto.

The bill would prevent the serving of chocolate milk sold to schools, which experts say now contains 60-90 milligrams of added salt.

Studies have shown that when chocolate milk is eliminated from school menus, "overall milk consumption drops by at least 35 percent," said Heidi Harkopf, a nutrition specialist with the New England Dairy and Food Council. Harkopf said experience has demonstrated that milk consumption in schools that ban chocolate and other flavored milks never returns to the original levels.

Harkopf said the problem is that milk is "the No. 1 food source" in the American diet for such critical nutritional elements as calcium, Vitamin D and potassium.

Federal officials recommend that Americans reduce their average sodium consumption from the current level of about 3,300 mg per day to 2,300 mg. Harkopf said that eliminating chocolate milk from a child's diet "hardly moves the needle in terms of reducing sodium."

According to Harkopf, there are no chocolate or flavored milks now available to Connecticut schools that meet the sodium standard set by the bill. She said the July 1 effective date in the legislation means that all Connecticut schools will have to eliminate chocolate milk from their menus in September.

But Marlene Schwartz, director of Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, said she does not expect chocolate milk to be banished from school lunch lines.

"This isn't going to keep out flavored milk," Schwartz said of the legislation. "All it's going to do it make sure the flavored milk that's in there is not going to have added salt."

Schwartz said a few years ago, when the federal government passed new school nutrition rules regarding calorie limits and other requirements, food companies adapted.

"The food industry quickly reformulated and met those standards,'' Schwartz said. Schools are "simply too big a market'' for beverage sellers, she added.

Researchers at the Cornell Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs recently published a study that found banning chocolate milk at 11 Oregon elementary schools did result in a drop in overall milk consumption. Milk sales at those schools fell by 10 percent, but the students also threw away 29 percent more milk than before the ban on chocolate milk.

Malloy spokesman Andrew Doba said Thursday that the bill in question had not yet reached the governor's desk. "We will review it when it arrives," Doba said.

State education officials declined to comment, referring all questions about the legislation to the governor's office.

New Haven is among the school districts that have banned flavored milk.

Although it took some time for students to get used to plain milk only, most of them adapted, said Gail Sharry, executive director of the school system's food service division. "I think it did finally level off," Sharry said of milk sales.

In 2010, the school district serving Virginia's Fairfax County banned chocolate milk in an effort to combat childhood obesity. According to The Washington Post, the school district was deluged with complaints from parents, nutritionists and dietary experts.

In 2011, Fairfax County officials agreed to resume serving chocolate milk in their school cafeterias but only if it was low-fat and did not contain high-fructose corn syrup.