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Poll Shows Strong Support for Bottled Water Tax Repeal and Healthier Kids' Meals Sugar Free Kids Preparing for Legislative Session

Maryland's leading voice in the fight against childhood obesity and teenage diabetes today announced the results of a statewide poll showing strong voter support for a public health tax cut and a big makeover for restaurant kids' meals.

OpinionWorks, a survey research firm based in Annapolis, MD, conducted the poll of 801 registered voters from December 9-13, 2014. It measured support for two proposals: 1) Repealing the Maryland sales tax on bottled water; and 2) Requiring restaurants that offer kids' menus to serve healthier drinks, such as low-fat milk, 100 percent juice, and water as part of the bundled price.

"These two proposals have strong and widespread support across the state. Support for repealing the sales tax on bottled water is substantial no matter where you live and regardless of party affiliation," said Steve Raabe, Founder and President of OpinionWorks, "Requiring restaurants to serve healthy drinks as part of their kids' menu receives especially vigorous support from parents."

Almost 80 percent of Maryland registered voters supported the drinking water tax repeal proposal (78 percent overall support, 61 percent strong support). On the kids' meal makeover proposal, 67 percent of Marylanders supported the change, 46 percent strongly so. Parents with children at home overwhelmingly supported the measure 75-21 percent. See the attached poll memo.

Both proposals are responding to the growing body of research that points to sugary drinks as the prime culprit in diseases such as childhood obesity and teen diabetes, both of which are on the rise. Sugary drinks contribute more calories and sugar to our children's diet than any other single source.

"Tap water is by far the cheapest, safest, and most accessible alternative to the sugary drinks that harm our children. But for many families, bottled water is their main source of drinking water. Our tax code should not discourage water consumption," said Michaeline Fedder, Government Affairs Director of the American Heart Association Mid-Atlantic Division.

Robi Rawl, Executive Director of Sugar Free Kids, added, "Drinking water is essential to life. In all its forms, whether from the tap, the fountain, or a bottle, water should be highly accessible, affordable, and tax-free."

“Healthy choices should be the easy choices in our community,” said Nikki Highsmith Vernick, president and CEO of the Horizon Foundation, a lead partner in the coalition. “Making over kids’ meals is a small but important step to help increase the number of healthy choices available for families.

“Young people who eat out are more likely to be regular sugary drink consumers because unhealthy drinks dominate the choices available,” said Chad Leo, an 8th grade student council leader at Mill Creek Middle School and the Maryland Association of Student Council’s representative to Sugar Free Kids. “We need a change.”

“The incidence of diabetes has increased seven fold over the past few decades,” said Dr. Brian Avin, immediate past president of MedChi. “These proposals could improve the long-term health of thousands of Maryland children by making water more affordable and by making healthy beverage options the default options in restaurants.”

Children from lower-income families and children of color are disproportionately affected by obesity and diabetes, and the toll these problems take on children and their families is immense.

“The Maryland NAACP is mobilizing its forces to advocate for policies that reduce childhood diseases like diabetes and obesity and improve health of children across the state,” said Gerald Stansbury, President of the NAACP Maryland State Conference. “Our chapter has always used its voice to fight for important public health policies. The time is to act is now!”

Today’s announcement comes less than a year after the group’s launch last February. During the last General Assembly session, Sugar Free Kids and its partners successfully advocated for legislation to improve the health and nutrition standards at child care centers in Maryland. These evidence-based policies build on last year’s success and are aimed at instilling healthy habits in children at a young age.

“Coronary artery disease begins in childhood and, according to American Heart Association research, the plaques that will stay with us for life have formed by the time a child has become a teenager,” said Fedder. “It makes sense, therefore, that the time to instill healthy behaviors is in early childhood, and these policies provide parents with the support they need to ensure they are setting their kids on the right path for long and healthy lives.”

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