

# No more fizz – but still loads of sugar

Fruit juices at schools may not be as healthy as they're meant to be

By **TASCHICA PILLAY** and **NIVASHINI NAIR**

● South Africa's leading cold-drink manufacturer is pulling its sugary soft drinks out of school tuck shops, but is still offering kids a sweet deal.

Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa is no longer supplying primary school outlets with fizzy drinks, including Coke and Fanta, that contain added sugar.

The beverage manufacturer has told primary school principals it will instead supply alternatives from its range of low- and no-kilojoule products, as well as plain bottled water and 100% fruit juice.

But the campaign – which comes ahead of the implementation of the government's sugar tax on the sale of soft drinks in a bid to stem lifestyle diseases – has left a bitter taste in the mouths of food police.

Experts who support the proposed sugar tax say Coca-Cola is misleading children into believing they are being offered healthier options when in fact the drinks on the new supply list are "more laden with sugar than the classic colas and lemonades".

In a letter to primary schools, Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa MD Velaphi Ratshefola said: "This is part of a worldwide commitment made by Coca-Cola Company to market responsibly, which includes not advertising to children under 12. In this context, we will be supplying primary school outlets with alternative options from our wide range of low- and no-kilojoule products as well as plain bottled water and 100% fruit juice."

The alternatives listed include Appletiser, red and white Grapetiser, Just Juice, Coke Zero and Coke Light, Fanta Zero, Sprite Zero, TAB, and Valpré still and sparkling water.

Ratshefola said the initiative was aimed at addressing rising child obesity.

Tshidi Ramogase, public affairs and communications director at Coca-Cola Beverages South Africa, said initial notices were sent to schools last year.

"We have a second phase currently in process, explaining the new healthier product availability, and this will be complete by August 18, when it will be effective."

The campaign forms part of a broader ap-



The country's largest soft-drink manufacturer is pulling fizzy drinks loaded with sugar out of primary schools. Picture: Thuli Dlamini

proach to respond to the need for consumers to consume less sugar. Other actions include rethinking recipes to reduce sugar content, making low- and no-sugar versions of the drinks available, and reducing the size of products.

Local soft-drink manufacturer Coo-ee, which also supplies soft drinks to schools, did not respond to queries.

Nicole Lubasinski, president of the Association for Dietetics in South Africa, said the alternatives suggested by the soft-drink manufacturer contained more sugar than the World Health Organisation's recommended daily limit for children.

"A 330ml serving of fruit juice contains

## Quick Facts

**One in four South African children aged two to 14 is already overweight or obese**

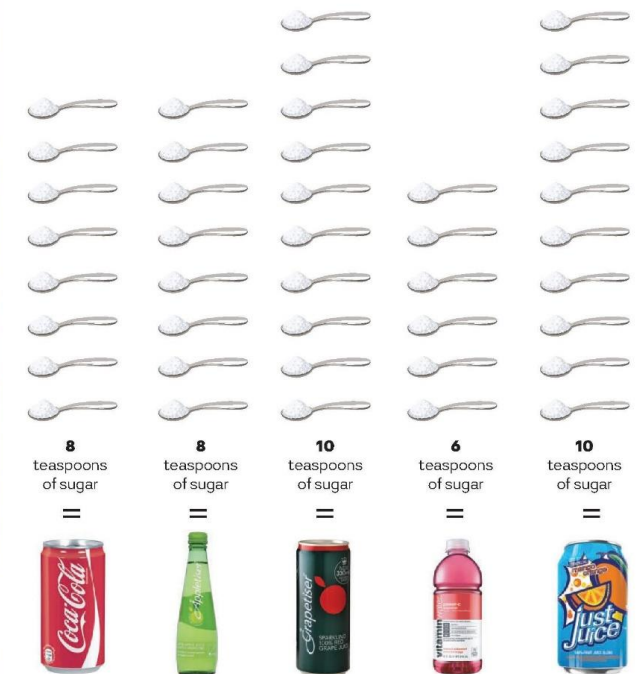
**Globally the number of overweight children under five will jump from 42 million to 70 million in the next decade**

almost 10 teaspoons of sugar, which is the same amount as a 330ml serving of a typical sugar-sweetened fizzy drink," she said. "WHO recommends that primary school-aged children should not have more than five to nine teaspoons of free sugars a day, and as fruit juice is considered a source of free sugar, children should be limiting their consumption of fruit juice, and rather enjoy fruit as whole fruit."

Healthy Living Alliance co-ordinator Tracey Malawana said Coca-Cola's concession was confusing to the public.

"What they are not telling us is that some of these [alternatives] are not much healthier. In fact, some items on the distributed list

## How much sugar is in the drink?



Graphic: Nolo Moima

also contain caffeine, which children should not be consuming at all."

Professor Karen Hofman, of the PRICE-LESS (priority cost-effective lessons for systems strengthening) research unit at the University of the Witwatersrand, said Coca-Cola's plan was a "half-baked solution".

She added: "Twenty percent of children are now overweight or obese in South Africa and this type of soft commitment will not address the problem, and nine- and 10-year-olds are the second-highest consumers of sugary beverages in the world."

"Sugary drinks consumption is a great public health risk that contributes to obesity, diabetes and other noncommunicable dis-

eases in South Africa. It is costing the country a fortune. About half of all diabetics are not diagnosed. For those who are diagnosed, it is costing the country R2-billion in medical costs," Hofman said.

"If the beverage industry is truly committed to addressing our obesity and related NCD epidemic, they should support enforceable regulations, such as the prohibition on sales of unhealthy drinks in schools, alongside sugary drinks taxation."

Earlier this year, former finance minister Pravin Gordhan said the tax would be implemented later this year. The Treasury is still considering submissions from stakeholders before the legislation can be passed.