GUEST COLUMN: Ketchup is not a vegetable

By John Summers
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One afternoon in the spring, my daughter came home from second grade at Cambridgeport School and mentioned that her stomach hurt. She believed her ache could be due to the chocolate milk and apple juice she drank at lunch. That she was able to double up on these beverages surprised me. Given the country’s epidemic of childhood diabetes and obesity, we must be careful not to give children sugary beverages with little redeeming nutritional value. Research in nutritional science points an accusing finger at sugar as the gateway to ill health in children and adults.

My daughter’s disclosure that day turned into a subject of inquiry. She brought home samples of the chocolate milk, fruit punch, and apple, grape, cherry, and orange juice available at her cafeteria. Together we investigated the ingredients: liquid sugar, or what the labels called “sugar water,” plus cornstarch, salt, and synthetic vitamins. We made a few, unsuccessful attempts to find a lab to test the samples. We discussed the matter with her pediatrician. We read about debates happening over these same sugary beverages in school districts all over the country -- except, as we learned, there was no debate in Cambridge.

I wrote to the director of the Food and Nutrition Services office asking what justified giving elementary school children such potentially dangerous beverages. “If we didn’t, it would negatively impact the nutritional quality of meals consumed by the neediest students who rely on us. There are families in our community where offering water and white milk is not the standard at home, and the beverage options we have available at school are the most nutritious options available to them.”

Hmm. Given that childhood diabetes and obesity affect poorer, needier kids in disproportionate numbers, shouldn’t we know whether the harmful effects of the sugar are worth the beneficial effects of the vitamins? If our kids imbibed less chocolate milk and juice, then do we know for sure that the decrease in synthetic protein, calcium, and vitamin C would not be worth the decrease in
sugar? Think about it. Childhood diabetes and obesity are far graver problems than inadequate protein and vitamin C. Opportunities to decrease sugar consumption are few. Opportunities to increase protein and vitamin C are many.

Eight months after posing that question, we await an answer. Meanwhile, we learned that no parent advisory committee exists in order to organize such inquiries. We also learned that the study cited by the director of the Office of Food and Nutrition in defense of chocolate milk hails from the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, which is widely known for employing behavioral science in order to advance such super-cool, counter-intuitive conclusions. As the New York Times reports on what appears to be a pattern of fraud in the lab, retractions of its papers are coming hand over fist.

Cambridge’s approach happens to be in sync with the Trump administration. On Dec. 4, taking aim at Obama’s “Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act,” Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue gave the nation’s schools permission to reintroduce chocolate milk with one-percent fat. Mr. Perdue explained the allowance with the same logic cited to me when I first asked about standards: “Schools want to offer food that students actually want to eat. It doesn’t do any good to serve nutritious meals if they wind up in the trash can.” Well, okay, but then we might just as well serve ice cream sodas at every meal.

I testified before the School Committee in November and since then have filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the contracts held by the office of Food and Nutrition Services and its vendors and suppliers. Emily Dexter, a member of the School Committee, plans to bring a motion on Dec. 19 to create a Parent Food and Beverage Advisory Board. Parents and students who may be interested in this subject should attend the meeting and speak your minds.

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