

Swiss schooling

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Energy drinks are full of caffeine

One can of Red Bull, the world's most popular brand, contains about as much caffeine as a cup of coffee and youngsters are having problems moderating themselves.

Some students come with packs of ten Red Bulls and drink two or three right there.

In 2004, Europe's top court upheld a French prohibition on Red Bull. Denmark and Norway have also banned the drink and Britain has warned pregnant women to avoid it.

The Austrian-based firm moves more than three billion cans per year. In Switzerland's kiosks, it is sold alongside brands including X-Fresh, Body Style, next to cheaper private labels.

Fearing strung out students and disorder in the classroom, certain schools in Switzerland have placed restrictions or outright prohibitions on energy drinks.

Now Toni Bortoluzzi, a politician on parliament's social security and health committee, has called on authorities around the country to ban the fizzy drinks. He has likened energy drinks to a quasi-drug. Bortoluzzi has received the support of the Swiss Federation of Cantonal Chemists, a body responsible for food safety.

"This goes in the direction of doping," the group's president, Peter Grütter, said of the beverages, which can include caffeine, ginseng, ginkgo bilboa and sugar. Prices for 250 millilitre cans range from SFr0.90 to SFr1.95 in grocery stores and are significantly higher in kiosks.

The labels caution children, pregnant woman and people averse to caffeine to stay away, but there are no rules about selling to children.

swissinfo

Experts say weak students get too much therapy

About half of all Swiss school-children with learning difficulties are undergoing some sort of therapy in an effort to solve their problems. That is far too many, according to the authors of a recently-published book on children. They say that parents, teachers and doctors have unrealistic expectations of children. Solothurn paediatrician Thomas Baumann and Zug paediatrician and youth psychiatrist Romedius Alber have written a 285-page book aimed at health professionals. Their goal is to reduce the numbers of children in therapy that might well be unnecessary.

Parents today are too quick to rush their children into treatment when things aren't going well at school. "Children haven't changed. It's just that more deviations from the norm are being diagnosed as pathological. Today we have totally incorrect conceptions of what is normal and what is not," Baumann said. Because of this, many parents see to it that their children receive remedial schooling or psychotherapy to counteract any perceived weaknesses.

It is not uncommon for children to be misdiagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). A teacher filling out a questionnaire might find one in three boys too fidgety or unfocused. Only about a third of those children might have ADHD; the others are inattentive for completely different reasons. For example, children of immigrants might understand too little of what is being said during a lesson, get bored and then become restless.

The fundamental problem is the sheer amount of psychological and aptitude testing that children have to undergo today. There is too much focus on detecting flaws, and too little focus on children's strengths. In former times, there were simply smarter and dumber children, and people

had faith that those who weren't good in a particular subject would still have a chance at a decent job.

While some extra help can certainly be beneficial, every diagnosis has a consequence. Therapies stigmatise. Children want to be normal, and they are not if they have to go to therapy every Wednesday afternoon rather than play football. The experts recommend that parents send their children to therapists that concentrate on boosting strengths rather than repairing defects.

Swiss schooling

Schooling in Switzerland is a cantonal responsibility, i.e. there are 26 different education systems in the country. The cantons are currently trying to harmonise their practices.

Every child in Switzerland must go to school for nine years, after which students are channelled into apprenticeships, specialised programmes or university tracks.

Primary school begins at age six. At the end of primary school, a child continues on to lower secondary schooling, where children are streamed according to performance, teacher recommendations and perhaps a test.

At this level students are being groomed for vocational education and apprenticeships or for continuing education at an upper secondary school.

At the age of 16, the youngsters move to Secondary II level, which generally lasts three to four years. More than two thirds are streamed into vocational training. This means the trainee spends most of his or her time working for an approved employer but attends a vocational school for one or two days a week. Others continue at full-time schools which might lead to university.