

Bag the Junk:

Improving competitive food policy to create healthier, smarter school environments

Key Facts

- *Competitive foods—snacks and beverages sold in schools outside of the school breakfast and lunch programs—are widely available in public schools.*
- *There are not strong federal nutrition standards for competitive foods in schools; many available offerings are high in fat, sugar and/or calories.*
- *The U.S. Department of Agriculture will release updated draft nutrition standards for competitive foods in Spring 2012.*
- *State and local authorities can adopt nutrition standards that exceed federal requirements to further improve the quality of snack foods and beverages sold in schools.*
- *The strongest competitive food policies include provisions to address school fundraisers, sports drinks, sodium, entrée items and positive nutritional value of foods and beverages.*

Background

In nearly all schools in the United States, foods and beverages are available for purchase through the federal National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program and through “competitive” venues including vending machines, food courts, à la carte lines, and snack bars.¹ Many students rely on schools for their food intake; an estimated 35-50% of children’s total calories are consumed at school.² However, problems arise when the foods and beverages offered at school are not healthy choices.

Breakfasts and lunches served at school are required to meet federal nutrition standards that are in line with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans, while foods available through competitive venues are largely exempt from nutrition requirements. As a result, many school buildings are filled with unhealthy snack and beverage options, readily available for student purchase.³

In response to rising rates of childhood obesity, and citing the connection between poor diet and overweight, many states and localities have established their own nutrition standards to prohibit or limit unhealthy snack foods and beverages in schools. However, in practice, many standards are not adequate enough to keep junk foods and beverages out of schools. Recent research indicates that nearly half of U.S. elementary school students can buy unhealthy snacks—such as cookies, cakes and baked goods—at school.⁴

Promisingly, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to update the national nutrition standards for competitive foods, and proposed standards are due out in Spring 2012.⁵

USDA recommendations will outline minimum nutritional standards for snack foods and beverages in all schools; however, several important provisions—including sports drinks, entrée items, positive nutritional value, and school fundraisers—are expected to be exempt from the national standards. The exemption of these key provisions creates an opportunity for forward-thinking states and localities to develop model standards that exceed federal requirements and better ensure that students learn in the healthiest environment possible.

Why Care About Competitive Foods?

Connection between Student Health and Academic Success

- Obesity rates among children and adults have increased dramatically over the past forty years. Today, nearly one in three American children aged 2-19 —over 23 million— are overweight or obese and at greater risk for chronic diseases and psychosocial problems.⁶⁻⁷ The consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages is a major contributor to the development of overweight and obesity.
- Numerous studies have shown that there is a strong association between the quality of a child's diet and their academic performance and achievement.^{8,9,10,11,12,13}

Competitive Foods are Often of Poor Nutritional Quality

- Federally funded meal programs in schools (*i.e.* school breakfast and lunch) are required to meet evidence-based dietary guidelines that promote good nutrition; snacks and drinks sold outside of these programs (*i.e.* competitive foods) are not.¹⁴ Promisingly, the USDA will release updated proposed nutrition standards for snack foods and beverages in Spring 2012.
- Competitive foods available in schools are often high in calories, fat, sugar, and salt. Many beverages sold in schools, such as soda, fruit drinks, sports drinks, and flavored waters are high in sugars and contain little, if any, nutritional value.¹⁵⁻¹⁶
- Middle and high schools tend to offer a greater quantity and variety of foods and beverages that are high in sugar, salt and fat than elementary schools.¹⁷ Many secondary schools also maintain contracts with fast-food vendors such as Taco Bell, McDonald's and Domino's Pizza that allow the sale of branded fast-food products in school cafeterias¹⁸⁻¹⁹
- Implementing school food policies that limit access to high-fat, high-sugar foods is proven to reduce the number of purchases of these types of foods by students.^{2,20,21,22}

Competitive Foods are Widely Available in Schools

- Between 1991 and 2008, the percentage of middle schools with vending machines increased from 42% to 77% and the percentage of high schools from 76% to 96%.²³⁻²⁴
- In 2008, 92% of high school students and 81% of middle school students could buy food or drinks from à la carte lines in school cafeterias.²⁴
- In 2010, 65% of elementary school students could buy food or drinks outside of school meals, through à la carte lines, vending machines, or school stores.⁴

School Environments are Often Contradictory to Nutrition Education Messages

- The availability of unhealthy snack foods and beverages at school is in direct opposition to healthy nutrition messaging promoted within school health curriculum and through nutrition promotion in the cafeteria.²⁵

Availability of Competitive Food Can Worsen Student Stigma

- Competitive foods can be especially damaging for students from low-income families. The presence of unhealthy snack foods and beverages in schools can foster peer pressure and stigma for low-income students who cannot afford to purchase foods not part of the subsidized school meal program.²⁵

Parents Want Improved School Food

- Most parents feel the nutritional health of students should be a school priority.²⁶ A 2011 poll commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 78% of American voters believe that schools should be required to meet higher nutrition standards for all foods they serve or sell to students.²⁷
- Attitudes about improved school food cross party lines. A 2012 poll found that 89% of Democrats, 78% of independents, and 71% of Republicans favor a rule that requires all schools to meet minimum nutrition standards for snack foods and beverages.²⁸

Nutrition Standards Options

The charts below outline voluntary nutrition guidelines for competitive foods and beverages during the school day. These recommendations were developed by four respected school nutrition organizations to help states and school districts create their own standards for the sale of snack foods and beverages in schools.

FOODS				
	<u>Institute of Medicine</u>²⁹	<u>Alliance for Healthier Generation</u>³⁰	<u>USDA HealthierUS Schools Challenge</u>³¹	<u>School Nutrition Association</u>³²
Calories (per portion)	200 calories or less	150 calories (Elementary)* 180 calories (Middle)* 200 calories (High)*	200 calories or less	200 calories or less
Fat	≤ 35% of total calories	≤ 35% of total calories (excludes nuts, seeds, nut butters and trail mix)	≤ 35% of total calories (excludes nuts, seeds, nut butters and reduced fat cheese)	≤ 35% of total calories (excludes nuts, seeds and cheese)
Trans Fat	Zero trans fat	Zero trans fat	Zero trans fat	Zero trans fat
Saturated Fat	≤ 10% of total calories	≤ 10% of total calories	≤ 10% of total calories (excludes reduced fat cheese)	≤ 10% of total calories
Sugar (per serving)	≤ 35% calories from total sugars, except for yogurt with no more than 30 grams of total sugars per 8 oz.	≤ 35% of sugar by weight	≤ 35% of sugar by weight (excludes fruit, vegetables and milk)	≤ 35% calories from total sugars
Sodium (per portion)	≤ 200 mg ≤ 480 mg for a la carte entrées	≤ 230 mg ≤ 480 mg for soups, dairy and a la carte entrées	≤ 480 mg ≤ 600 mg for a la carte entrées	≤ 230 mg A la carte entrées must meet federal meal program guidelines

* Snacks must contain at least two of the following: 2 g fiber; 5 g protein; 10% daily value of Vitamin A, C, E, folate, calcium, magnesium or iron; or, ¼ cup fruits or vegetables.

BEVERAGES				
	<u>Institute of Medicine</u>²⁹	<u>Alliance for Healthier Generation</u>³⁰	<u>USDA HealthierUS Schools Challenge</u>³¹	<u>School Nutrition Association</u>³²
Caffeine				
Elementary	Not allowed	Allowed	Not allowed	Not allowed
Middle	Not allowed	Allowed	Not allowed	Not allowed
High	Not allowed	Allowed	Not allowed	Not allowed
Juice				
Elementary	100% juice only 4 oz. portion	100% juice only 120 calories per 8 oz.	100% juice only 6 oz. portion	100% juice only 10 oz. portion
Middle	100% juice only 4 oz. portion	100% juice only 150 calories per 10 oz.	100% fruit and vegetable juices only 6 oz. portion	100% juice or juice/water blend with carbonation 12 oz. portion
High	100% juice only 8 oz. portion	100% juice only 180 calories per 12 oz.	100% fruit and vegetable juices only 8 oz. portion	100% juice or juice/water blend with carbonation 12 oz. portion

BEVERAGES (continued)				
	<u>Institute of Medicine</u>²⁹	<u>Alliance for Healthier Generation</u>³⁰	<u>USDA HealthierUS Schools Challenge</u>³¹	<u>School Nutrition Association</u>³²
Milk (includes lactose-free and soy/non-dairy milks)				
Elementary	Same as high school requirement	1% milk and non-fat milk only (flavored or non-flavored) 150 calories per 8 oz.	Same as high school requirement	1% milk and non-fat milk only (flavored or non-flavored) 170 calories per 8 oz.
Middle	Same as high school requirement	1% milk and non-fat milk only (flavored or non-flavored) 188 calories per 10 oz.	Same as high school requirement	Same as high school requirement
High	1% milk and non-fat milk only 8 oz. portion Flavored milk with no more than 22 g of sugar per 8 oz. portion school	1% milk and non-fat milk only (flavored or non-flavored) 225 calories per 12 oz.	1% milk and non-fat milk only (flavored or non-flavored)	1% milk and non-fat milk only (flavored or non-flavored) 255 calories per 12 oz.
Water				
Elementary	Same as high school requirement	Same as middle school requirement	Same as high school requirement	Water must not contain flavoring, additives, carbonation or added sugar.
Middle	Same as high school requirement	Water must not contain added sugars, artificial sweeteners or sodium	Same as high school requirement	Same as high school requirement
High	Water must not contain flavoring, additives or carbonation	No requirements	Water must not contain sweeteners, carbonation or caffeine	Must not contain caffeine or fortification and be less than 5 calories per portion, up to 20 oz. portion size
Sports drinks (e.g. Gatorade)				
Elementary	Same as high school guidelines	Not allowed	Not allowed	Not allowed
Middle	Same as high school guidelines	Not allowed	Not allowed	Same as high school guidelines
High	Not allowed, except for student athletes participating in vigorous activity for more than 1 hour	Allowed, up to 99 calories per 12 oz. serving	Not allowed	Allowed, must be non-caffeinated and non-fortified with less than 5 calories per portion; up to 20 oz. portion size
FUNDRAISERS				
	Standards apply to fundraising activities during the school day.	Standards apply to fundraisers, except when parents/adults are a significant part of the audience.	Standards apply to fundraising activities during the school day.	Fundraisers not addressed in guidelines

Policy Recommendations

Schools should strive to create learning environments that promote healthy food and beverage choices, thus fostering better health and greater academic success among students. The following recommendations for policy makers are based on a comprehensive review of published guidelines for snack foods and beverages sold in schools. In general, we recommend that states and localities adhere to the Institute of Medicine guidelines for foods and beverages, paying particular attention to the following provisions:

- **Ban the sale of sports drinks in schools.** Sugary sports drinks make up the second largest beverage category in high schools and the third largest beverage category in middle and elementary schools.³³ The American Heart Association recommends that most children and adolescent girls consume no more than 20 grams of added sugars per day, and adolescent boys consume no more than 33 grams of added sugars per day.³⁴ With 35 grams of added sugar, the average 20-ounce sports drink exceeds daily recommended amounts for all children. What is more, the National Academies' Institute of Medicine and the American Academy of Pediatrics both conclude that sports drinks are unnecessary for students engaged in routine physical activity.^{29,35}
- **Provide guidelines for entrée items not just snacks.** Some competitive food guidelines only require that nutrition standards apply to snack foods, exempting entrée-sized foods. Many secondary schools have contracts with vendors that serve entrée size portions of branded fast-food products in school cafeterias. Schools should set nutritional guidelines to ensure both snack and entrée portions are healthy choices.
- **Limit the amount of sodium in competitive foods.** Most children and adolescents eat too much sodium. The Dietary Reference Intake for sodium is no more than 1,500 mg to 2,300 mg per day for children (depending on age).³⁶ However, more than 75 percent of children consume more than 2,300 mg of sodium a day.³⁷ Reducing the amount of sodium in school competitive foods to no more than 200 mg for snacks and 480 mg for meats, soup and entrées can help to significantly reduce students' daily sodium intake.
- **Require competitive foods to contain positive nutritional value.** Food and beverage manufacturers often artificially supplement junk foods to skirt around school nutrition guidelines (*e.g.* candy bars with added calcium and fiber). To prevent this practice, strong policies should require that all competitive foods contain positive nutritional value, such as a serving of fruits, vegetables, dairy, or meat alternates such as nuts/nut butters.
- **Require that competitive food and beverage guidelines apply to school fundraisers.** More than 75 percent of schools hold between one and five fundraisers per year, and one in four schools holds between five and 10 fundraisers per year, making school fundraisers a common, and often constant, part of students', staff's, and parents' lives.³⁸ School fundraisers are often exempt from nutrition guidelines, allowing the sale of unhealthy foods like candy and pizza. Requiring school fundraisers to adhere to competitive foods guidelines would ensure that only healthy food is available to students during the school day, and encourage the use of non-food fundraising strategies such as car washes, walk-a-thons, and gift card sales.

ENDNOTES

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