



# Health Policy Snapshot

Childhood Obesity

## ISSUE BRIEF

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# What are competitive foods? How do they impact student health?

## Takeaways:

- Competitive foods are snack foods and beverages served and sold in schools, in vending machines, à la carte lines and stores. They are not part of the federal school meal programs.
- Federal nutrition standards for competitive foods have not been updated since 1979, but some schools are already strengthening their standards.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will soon release proposed updated standards for competitive foods. Research shows these standards must be comprehensive in scope in order to improve children's diets and help prevent obesity.

## Overview

One in three U.S. children is overweight or obese, putting them at greater risk for a variety of health problems, impacting their ability to live a healthy life and straining the healthcare system.<sup>1</sup> Students consume 35 percent to 50 percent of their daily calories at school and are often exposed to junk foods and sugary drinks that offer little nutritional value.

In 2010, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was enacted to provide healthier foods and beverages in

schools. The law charged USDA with updating nutrition standards for the National School Breakfast and National School Lunch programs and these were updated in early 2012.

That same law also requires that USDA update the nutrition standards for competitive foods and beverages. These draft standards, the first update in more than 30 years, are expected in spring 2012.

## UNHEALTHY SNACKS AND BEVERAGES ARE WIDELY AVAILABLE AND LARGELY UNREGULATED IN SCHOOLS

Students of all ages are surrounded by junk foods and sugary drinks throughout the school day. About 40 percent of all students buy and eat one or more snacks at school; 68 percent buy and consume at least one sugary drink. In 2010, 65 percent of elementary school students had access to vending machines, stores, à la carte lines or other venues that sold snacks or drinks outside of meals.<sup>2</sup>

While most school districts have a wellness policy that addresses competitive foods, the policies are generally weak, and many schools have not implemented them.<sup>3,4</sup> In 2010, only 55 percent of elementary school students were in a school with nutritional guidelines for foods and drinks sold outside of meals.<sup>5</sup> Two-thirds of states have weak or no nutrition standards for competitive foods.<sup>6</sup>

## SCHOOLS ARE TAKING ACTION

Although student access to competitive foods and beverages is virtually exempt from federal

regulation, and many states and districts have taken only small steps, some schools are taking broader action to make these foods and beverages healthier.

For example, schools like Lewis Frazier Middle School in Hinesville, Georgia and West Bolivar Middle School in Rosedale, Mississippi are just two of 14,000 of schools participating in the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program. Lewis Frasier Middle School has worked with its vendors to make sure that all beverages sold in vending machines adhere to the Alliance's *School Beverage and Competitive Foods Guidelines* and has found these options sell just as well as the sugary drinks and revenue has not declined. West Bolivar Middle School has removed all soda and sugary drinks from vending machines and stocks their machines with water only.

A study of Boston public school students found a decline in the consumption of sugary drinks after a policy restricting the sale of those beverages was put in place. The number of students who said they did not drink any sugar-sweetened beverages also increased. While the study did not review any parallels between weight loss and the decline in sugary drink consumption, it did show that a school policy on competitive drinks was associated with less consumption and likely fewer empty calories taken in by students.<sup>7</sup>

## STANDARDS FOR COMPETITIVE FOODS MUST BE SCIENCE-BASED AND COMPREHENSIVE

As USDA prepares to issue its draft standards, it is critical the final regulations are based on up-to-date nutrition science. Additionally, research shows that in order to be effective, standards should cover all foods and beverages sold and served in school. A study of public schools from 40 different states revealed that students bought fewer sugary drinks only when schools banned all sugar-sweetened beverages.<sup>8</sup> Banning only sodas and offering other

sugary beverages, like sports drinks, had no impact on student purchases of sugary drinks at school.

## CONCLUSION

It is crucial that USDA's final regulations for competitive foods reflect the current nutrition science and are comprehensive. This will help ensure that all foods and beverages available in schools contribute to a healthy diet.

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [\*RWJF Research and Resources on Snack Foods and Beverages in Schools\*](#)
- [\*Kids Safe and Healthful Foods Project\*](#)
- [\*Nutrition Alliance for Nutrition and Activity\*](#)
- [\*Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program\*](#)

<sup>1</sup> <http://jama.ama-assn.org/content/303/3/242.full>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/\\_asset/92v1fd/ES\\_2012\\_execsumm.pdf](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/92v1fd/ES_2012_execsumm.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/\\_asset/984r22/SS\\_2011\\_monograph.pdf](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/984r22/SS_2011_monograph.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/\\_asset/92v1fd/ES\\_2012\\_execsumm.pdf](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/92v1fd/ES_2012_execsumm.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/\\_asset/92v1fd/ES\\_2012\\_execsumm.pdf](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/92v1fd/ES_2012_execsumm.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cspinet.org/2007schoolreport.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/product.jsp?id=72666>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/product.jsp?id=73500>