Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Health Policy Snapshot

Childhood Obesity

ISSUE BRIEF
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How can healthier school snacks and beverages improve student health and help school budgets?

Takeaways:

- Schools sell many unhealthy snacks and beverages to students, in à la carte lines, vending machines, and other venues.
- Policies that restrict sales of unhealthy snacks and beverages in schools can improve children's diets, reduce weight gain, and increase food service revenues.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working to strengthen nutrition standards for school snack foods and beverages, which have not been updated in more than 30 years.

Overview

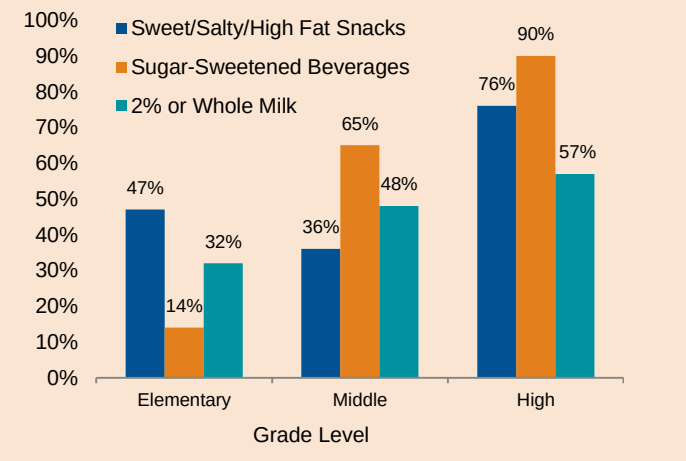
Today, more than 23.5 million children and adolescents in the United States are overweight or obese, putting them at greater risk for serious health problems and straining the health care system.[1] Students consume 35 percent to 50 percent of their daily calories at school, where they often are exposed to junk foods and sugary drinks that offer little nutritional value.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 charged USDA with updating nutrition standards for the School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program, which USDA did in early 2012. The law also requires USDA to update nutrition standards for snack foods and beverages in schools, which have not been updated since 1979. USDA is expected to issue proposed standards in early 2013.

UNHEALTHY SNACKS AND BEVERAGES ARE WIDELY AVAILABLE IN U.S. SCHOOLS

Students of all ages are surrounded by unhealthy fare throughout the school day. About 40 percent of all students buy and eat one or more snacks at school,[2] and 68 percent buy and consume at least one sugary drink.[3] An analysis of USDA data found that students consume almost 400 billion calories from junk foods sold in our nation's schools each year.[4]

Percentage of U.S. Students with Access to Unhealthy Snacks and Beverages in School, 2009-10



Source: *www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/her_research_briefs/RRCompFoods7-2012.pdf*

STRONG POLICIES WORK

Strong policies—those at the state and/or district level that restrict sales of unhealthy snack foods and

beverages at school—have a significant impact on children's diets and their weight.

In 2010, three years after California began implementing strong policies, the state's high school students consumed 158 fewer calories per day than students in states that allowed schools to sell unhealthy snacks and drinks.[5] Notably, research shows that the nation would achieve its *Healthy People 2020* goals for reducing childhood obesity rates by eliminating an average of 64 calories per day from children's diets.[6]

An analysis of laws in 40 states found that children and teens in states with strong laws gained less weight over a three-year period than those living in states without such policies.[7] Other research shows that students' body mass indices increased when schools sold junk foods, and that schools had lower proportions of overweight or obese students when they limited the sale of unhealthy items.[8]

Research also suggests that such strong policies are financially viable. A health impact assessment found that, when states implemented nutrition standards for school snacks and beverages, school districts experienced an increase in food service revenues.[9] The report also found that many school food service departments may be losing money when students buy unhealthy snack foods instead of healthier breakfasts or lunches. Schools in California, Connecticut, Texas, and West Virginia reported increases in revenue or no changes in revenue after implementing strong nutrition standards for snack foods and beverages.[10]

CURRENT PATCHWORK OF POLICIES

While the evidence clearly shows that strong policies work, the scope and strength of state laws and policies at the district and school levels vary widely. For example, two-thirds of states have weak or no nutrition standards for school snack foods and beverages.[11] And although most school districts have a wellness policy that addresses snack foods and beverages, the policies are generally weak, and many schools have not implemented them.[12,13] Further, a recent analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that many U.S. secondary schools reduced the availability of unhealthy snacks between 2002 and 2008, but progress has since stalled.[14]

CONCLUSION

It is crucial that USDA's final standards for school snacks and beverages are comprehensive and reflect current nutrition science. This will provide consistent guidelines for states, districts, and schools, as well as food and beverage companies, and help ensure that all foods and beverages available in schools contribute to a healthy diet.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- *RWJF Resources on Competitive Foods*
- *National Nutrition Standards for Snack and a la Carte Foods and Beverages Sold in Schools*

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[1] *http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=185233*
[2] *www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=38769*
[3] *http://www.rwjf.org/content/rwjf/en/research-publications/find-rwjf-research/2009/02/improving-child-nutrition-policy/consumption-of-low-nutrient--energy-dense-foods-and-beverages-at.html*
[4] *http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2012/rwjf401381*
[5] *http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1151631*
[6] *www.ajpmonline.org/webfiles/images/journals/amepre/AMEPRE_3352-stamped.pdf*
[7] *http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2012/08/08/peds.2011-3353.abstract*
[8] *www.healthyeatingresearch.org/images/stories/her_research_briefs/RRCompFoods7-2012.pdf*
[9] *www.pewhealth.org/uploadedFiles/PHG/Content_Level_Pages/Reports/KS_HIA_revised%20WEB%20FINAL%2073112.pdf*
[10] *http://www.neahin.org/assets/pdfs/healthyrewards_neahin.pdf*
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[14] *http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/PCS_Assets/2012/Pew_Out_of_Balance.pdf*