

EMBARGOED FOR:

November 1, 2010

4:00pm ET

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High-Calorie Beverages Remain Widely Available in U.S. Elementary Schools

Problem Most Severe in the South, Where Obesity Rates are Highest

Chicago, November 1, 2010 – Almost half of the nation’s public elementary school students could purchase unhealthy beverages such as sodas, sports drinks and higher-fat milk during the 2008-09 school year, according to a study published today in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. Two particular factors could explain the easy access, the authors say: More elementary schools are selling these drinks in stores and à la carte cafeteria lines, and few schools limit beverage sales to just healthy choices.

Compared with other regions of the country, sugar-sweetened beverages were strikingly more prevalent in the South, where obesity rates are already the highest in the nation. More than 20 percent of public elementary school students in the South could buy sodas and other sugary drinks in competitive venues—such as vending machines, school stores and à la carte lines. The same was true for 9 percent of students in both the Midwest and West and 14 percent of students in the Northeast.

“Despite nationwide efforts to reduce the amount of sodas, sports drinks, higher-fat milk and other high-calorie drinks sold in schools, the reality is that many students still can purchase them on campus,” said lead author Lindsey Turner, Ph.D. Turner is a co-investigator with Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study. “Elementary school students are still surrounded by a variety of unhealthy beverages while at school,” she noted.

The study, “Wide Availability of High-Calorie Beverages in U.S. Elementary Schools,” presents the most recent data available and is based on nationally representative surveys of schools during the 2006–07, 2007–08 and 2008–09 academic years. The researchers compared the beverages sold to national nutrition guidelines developed by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which recommends that only bottled water, 100% juice and lower-fat (nonfat or 1%) milk be offered in elementary schools.

The researchers identified several important trends over the three-year period:

- The prevalence of both healthy and unhealthy beverages rose. By 2008–09, lower-fat milk and bottled water were the most commonly available drinks, but more students could purchase unhealthy drinks in stores and à la carte lines than in 2006-07.

- The percentage of students who could buy *only healthy* beverages outside of school meals, like bottled water, 100% juice or lower-fat milk, increased significantly—from 10 percent to 16 percent—but remained low overall.
- Many schools removed higher-fat milk from their lunch program but added them to their competitive venues. In 2008–09, more than 68 percent of students could buy 2% or whole milk as part of a school lunch, and more than 35 percent could buy it from a competitive venue. Two years earlier, those numbers had been 77 percent and 29 percent, respectively.

“It’s a good first step for schools to give students healthy choices,” Turner said, although schools mostly added the healthier drinks to accompany the unhealthy choices they still provided. “But what would really make a difference is removing the unhealthy beverages entirely,” she continued.

The authors agree with the IOM guidelines and note that federal, state and local governments can help schools comply by setting policies that support access to only healthy drinks and decrease access to unhealthy ones.

“It’s encouraging to see that more schools are offering healthy beverages, but we must continue to push for changes to make schools even healthier,” said C. Tracy Orleans, Ph.D., RWJF senior scientist. “Other research has shown us that when schools replace unhealthy foods and beverages with healthy ones, they don’t lose money and they can help kids reduce their intake of extra calories.”

The Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill currently before Congress would require updated school meal nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast programs. It also would require that only nonfat and low-fat milk be part of these programs. A critical issue in the debate is whether to grant the U.S. Department of Agriculture the authority to apply school nutrition standards to all foods and beverages served or sold anywhere on campus for the full school day. The Senate has already passed its version of the reauthorization bill, and the House of Representatives may consider it after the 2010 mid-term elections.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org.

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