

Competitive Foods

This paper is part of a series of nutrition policy profiles prepared by Prevention Institute for the Center for Health Improvement (CHI).

Background

Competitive foods are those foods being sold alongside the federally approved school breakfast or school lunch menu. The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs were established by Congress to provide nutritious meals to children at school. The programs have strict nutritional guidelines calculated to provide about one third of a student's daily nutritional needs. Federal law also requires school meals to limit fat and saturated fat and encourages voluntary limits for sugar and sodium. While schools have been working to improve the nutritional quality of school meals, a growing number of elementary, middle, and high schools have begun to sell food and beverages other than the federally qualifying meals. These "competitive foods" are a source of income for food service departments, school programs, and extracurricular activities. They are sold in the cafeteria as a la carte items or through vending machines, school stores, and events elsewhere on school grounds. Studies of competitive foods across the U.S. and in California have documented that the most common foods offered are candy, chips, desserts, ice cream, and soft drinks.^{1,2}

The proliferation of competitive foods has raised concern among public health officials, parents, teachers, and others since many of these foods can undermine children's diets and health. National studies have found that 78 percent of high schools, 65 percent of middle schools, and 31 percent of elementary schools offered foods a la carte.³ A la carte items are foods sold individually by school food service during meal times rather than as part of a complete National School Lunch Program meal. A recent California study found that in 71 percent of surveyed school districts, a la carte items accounted for up to 70 percent of all food sales at schools, with popular items including fast foods such as pizza, cookies, and chips.⁴ Unlike the National School Lunch Program, these foods are not required to meet any nutritional standards. The high presence of fast foods as a la carte items is a concern, as they tend to be of limited nutritional value and contain high levels of fat, salt, and sugar.⁵ A study of student stores in 13 middle schools in San Diego County, California documented the purchase of approximately 10,000 snack food items per week, purchased by about half the student body, with 89 percent of the foods being high in fat or sugar.⁶

This is a concern for two reasons. First, childhood and adolescence are important times to establish lifelong good eating habits. Second, the high consumption of high-fat, high-calorie food is taking its toll on U.S. children and adolescents. Obesity rates are rising rapidly, and greater numbers of school-age children are showing signs of diet-related chronic disease, including Type II (adult onset) diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol.⁷

Federal guidelines put very few restrictions on the sale of competitive foods. The only prohibition is on the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value (soda water, Popsicles, and hard

candy) in the food service area during meal times. The federal law does authorize state agencies and school food authorities to impose additional standards.

Policy

Establish nutrition standards for all foods sold or provided on school campuses.

Such standards will help schools to provide consistent nutrition messages both inside and outside the classroom. Healthy school nutrition environments will also help to support good eating habits in childhood and prevent diet-related diseases in adulthood.

In 1993, the West Virginia Board of Education developed and adopted Standards for School Nutrition, which contains some of the strongest guidelines for competitive foods in the country.⁸ These standards have evolved since the early 1970s and govern the sale and serving of all foods on school grounds during the school day. The regulations limit the sale of a la carte foods in the cafeteria to meal components at breakfast and to fluid milk, milkshakes, and bottled water at lunch. The sale or serving of candy, chewing gum, and Popsicles, as well as foods or drinks containing 40 percent or more sugar by weight or more than 8 grams of fat per ounce, is prohibited in vending machines, classroom parties, and fundraising events during school hours. When the 1993 regulations went into effect, parents initially objected to “taking candy” from children at classroom parties. The Child Nutrition Program developed a guide, “Let’s Party,” to assist schools in complying with the guidelines at school-sponsored events and conducted workshops around the state to cultivate the support of parents and faculty for the health-oriented policies. Recently, however, West Virginia State law was adopted to permit, with the approval of district boards of education, the sale of soft drinks in high schools during non-mealtimes.

The State of Florida prohibits the sale of foods and beverages in competition with the district-approved foods service program in elementary schools. In high schools, these foods may be sold one hour after the lunch period with the approval of the local school board. In October 1999, the State Board of Education approved an exception to permit the sale of carbonated soft drinks in high schools. These drinks may be sold at all times outside of the areas where school breakfast or lunch is being served or eaten if a 100 percent fruit juice alternative is available in the same location.⁹

Effectiveness

The policies in both states are effective in limiting the availability of low-nutrition, high-calorie competitive foods in elementary schools. The West Virginia regulations go a step farther by extending the nutrition standards to foods served in classroom parties and fundraising efforts. Restricting competitive foods can have a significant impact. A recent study in Southeast Texas found that fifth graders with access to a snack bar that primarily sold French fries and pickles had 25 percent lower average intakes at lunch of fruits and vegetables than fourth graders without a la carte foods. At the same time, fifth graders that only purchased National School Lunch Program meals reported eating twice the amount of fruits and vegetables as students only purchasing snack bar food.¹⁰ By minimizing unhealthy options in the elementary school

environment, the West Virginia and Florida Boards of Education are increasing the likelihood that students will consume healthy foods during the school day.

As described in a related policy brief, “Soft Drink Contracts in Schools,” soft drink corporations are directing their marketing efforts to schools in order to develop brand loyalty and encourage soft drink consumption by children and youth. The recent changes to both the West Virginia and Florida regulations suggest that these corporations are successfully putting pressure on school officials to place their products on school campuses. The consumption of high-sugar, caffeinated beverages is a contributing factor to childhood obesity and replaces the consumption of healthier foods and beverages.¹¹ These exceptions to otherwise strict food and nutrition standards in schools weaken the effectiveness of competitive food regulations.

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¹ Bodgen JF. Policies to promote healthy eating. In: *Fit, Healthy and Ready to Learn: A School Health Policy Guide, Part 1: Physical Activity, Healthy Eating, and Tobacco-Use Prevention*. Alexandria, Va: National Association of State Boards of Education; 2000:E1-E41.

² Samuels and Associates. *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations*. Sacramento, Calif: Public Health Institute; 2000.

³ Bogden JF, Vega-Matos CA. *Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn: A School Health Policy Guide, Part One: Physical Activity, Healthy Eating and Tobacco Use Prevention*. Alexandria, Va: National Association of State Boards of Education; 2000.

⁴ Samuels and Associates. *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations*. Sacramento, Calif: Public Health Institute; 2000.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wildey M, Pampalone SZ, Pelletier R, Zive M, Elder JP, Sallis JF. Fat and sugar levels are high in snacks purchased from student stores in middle schools. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2000;100:319-323.

⁷ Samuels and Associates. *2000 California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings and Recommendations*. Sacramento, Calif: Public Health Institute; 2000.

⁸ Stuhldreher WL, Koehler AN, Harrison MK, Deel H. The West Virginia Standards for School Nutrition. *The Journal of Child Nutrition and Management*. 1998;22:79-86.

⁹ Florida Department of Education. Rule 6-7.042, Responsibilities for the School Food Service Program. *Florida Administrative Weekly* [serial online]. November 19, 1999;25:5309-5310. Available at: <http://faw.dos.state.fl.us/fawframes.html>. Accessed May 17, 2002.

¹⁰ Cullen KW, Eagan J, Baranowski T, Owens E, de Moor C. Effect of a la carte and snack bar foods at school on children's lunchtime intake of fruits and vegetables. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 2000;100:1482-1486.

¹¹ Ludwig DS, Peterson KE, Gortmaker SL. Relation between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: a prospective, observational analysis. *The Lancet*. 2001;357:505-508.