



# CHILD NUTRITION POLICY BRIEF

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## Competitive Foods in Schools

The phrase “**competitive foods**” refers to foods and beverages which are offered at school, other than meals and snacks served through the federally-reimbursed school lunch, breakfast and afterschool snack programs. Competitive foods include: extra foods and beverages sold through “à la carte” lines (which offer other food items for sale alongside the federally-reimbursed school meals); snack bars; student stores; vending machines; and fundraisers (where school organizations sell baked goods or candy to raise money.)

### TRENDS IN CHILDREN’S DIETS AND HEALTH

- Obesity rates have doubled among children and tripled among adolescents over the past 20 years. Overweight children and adolescents are more likely to become obese adults, increasing their risk for serious chronic diseases later in life.
- Type 2 diabetes, which is closely linked to overweight, has skyrocketed among children and adolescents over the past decade. Childhood obesity has also been associated with increased rates of high cholesterol and high blood pressure among children.
- Only two percent of school-aged children meet the Food Guide Pyramid recommendations for all five food groups. Less than one in five children eat the recommended number of servings of fruits or vegetables. The vast majority of children consume too much fat and sodium. Children with unhealthy eating patterns tend to maintain those unhealthy habits into adulthood.
- A 500 percent increase in soft drink consumption over the past 50 years has displaced the consumption of healthier beverages. Adolescents now drink twice as much soda as milk. Only 36 percent of boys and 14 percent of girls consume enough calcium, leading to increased risk of osteoporosis later in life. Children who drink soft drinks also are more likely to become obese than those who do not.

### COMPETITIVE FOODS IN SCHOOLS

- Research shows that access to competitive foods in school reduces the quality of students’ diets.
- While school meals must meet federal nutrition standards, competitive foods in schools are not required to meet these standards. Most competitive foods are low in nutrients and high in fat, added sugars, sodium and calories.
- 99 percent of high schools, 97 percent of middle schools and 83 percent of elementary schools have vending machines, school stores or snack bars. The most common competitive foods are carbonated sodas, fruit drinks with low percentages of juice, salty snacks and high-fat baked goods.
- Sales of competitive foods lead to decreases in school meal participation, meaning fewer children consuming meals at school that meet nutrition standards and less cash and commodity support provided to schools through the federal school meal programs.
- Current USDA statutory authority to regulate competitive foods is extremely limited. During school meal periods, foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNVs) are not allowed to be sold in food service areas, but may be sold anywhere else in the school at any time. FMNVs are defined as foods providing less than five percent of recommended intakes for eight key nutrients; examples include carbonated soda, gum, hard candies and jelly beans. Other competitive foods, such as candy bars, chips and ice cream, are not considered FMNVs and may be sold in the cafeteria during meal periods.

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### Competitive Foods in Schools

- The Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 2004 required all school districts to develop school wellness policies that address standards for all foods in the school environment. As a result, many more schools are, or soon will be, implementing guidelines for competitive foods that require healthier items such as 100 percent juice, low fat milk, water, yogurt, fruits and vegetables. Often these new standards include restrictions on portion sizes as well. Schools that have already made these changes have not lost revenue as a result.
- For more information on the current status of competitive foods in schools, see the United States General Accounting Office's August 2005 report to Congress at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05563.pdf>.

### IMPACT OF COMPETITIVE FOODS ON LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

- The sale of competitive foods is especially harmful for low-income students. If students from families with limited budgets eat less healthy snack food instead of a free or reduced-price school meal, they lose out nutritionally in a much bigger way than their more affluent peers who make the same kind of choices but are more likely to be able to obtain healthy foods in other ways.
- The presence of competitive foods creates stigma for low-income children. Peers notice who chooses the school meals rather than the items from vending machines or the à la carte line. Low-income children must choose between spending money they can ill afford, in order to be seen as “one of the group”, or singling themselves out by forgoing competitive foods.

### SCHOOL NUTRITION ENVIRONMENT

- Research shows that when a child's nutritional needs are met, the child is more attentive in class and has better attendance and fewer disciplinary problems. Properly nourished children more actively participate in the education experience, which benefits them, their fellow students, and the entire school community.
- Nutrition lessons taught in the classroom should be reflected and reinforced by the school environment. A healthy eating environment teaches children good nutrition and the elements of a proper diet, which can have positive effects on children's eating habits and physical well-being throughout life.
- Inadequate seating capacity has led some schools to pack together multiple lunch periods that begin as early as 10:30 am and as late as 1:30 pm, often without allowing students enough time to eat. With such difficult schedules, many students turn to less nutritious snacks sold through vending machines and school stores.

### NUTRITIONAL QUALITY OF FEDERALLY FUNDED SCHOOL MEALS

- Every school meal is required to provide a specified serving from each food group. There is no supersizing in school meals. In fact, school meals are often the best examples of healthy portion sizes and dietary variety to which children are exposed in their daily lives.
- While there is room for improvement in the quality of school meals, research shows that children who eat school meals consume more milk and eat more fruits and vegetables.
- School lunches and breakfasts meet the standard of providing at least one third and one fourth, respectively, of the recommended levels for key nutrients (protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron.) For low-income students, these nutrients are especially important, since their school meals may be filling in nutritional gaps left by tight household budgets.