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For more information, contact:

Christine Clayton
609-627-5937
media@rwjf.org

Students of All Ages Exposed to Food, Beverage Marketing in U.S. Public Schools

Study reveals how companies target different age groups and students from lower-income families

Princeton, N.J.—The majority of U.S. public school students are exposed to marketing for foods and beverages at school, according to a new study published today in *JAMA Pediatrics*. The study finds that food and beverage companies advertise to younger students in order to reach their parents, and use more direct tactics when targeting older students. Authors also noted that companies market more in schools that have a high percentage of students from lower-income families. This is the first national study to quantify food and beverage marketing in schools and measure changes over time.

Using nationally representative samples of elementary, middle, and high schools for six school years, from 2007 to 2012, researchers examined trends in student exposure to in-school marketing practices, including ads, exclusive beverage contracts and food-vending contracts (and related sponsorships and incentives), and the availability of fast food. Contract incentives include cash awards or other donations made once school food or beverage sales reach a set level.

The study, "Commercialism in US Elementary and Secondary School Nutrition Environments: Trends from 2007-2012," was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through its *Bridging the Gap* (BTG) research program. BTG is a joint project of the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Michigan.

Key findings include:

- Some marketing strategies have decreased significantly over time (especially those related to beverage vending), but more than 70 percent of elementary and middle school students, and almost 90 percent of high school students, attended schools with one or more forms of food and beverage advertising.
- Coupons that encourage parents to take their children to participating businesses and/or purchase marketed products at local grocery stores were the most common strategy companies used in elementary schools. Sixty-four percent of elementary school students were exposed to such practices in 2012, and use of such coupons was more prevalent in schools with a higher percentage of students from lower-income families.

- Companies were most likely to use exclusive beverage contracts to reach older students, who—unlike younger students—tend to have disposable income and immediate purchasing power. Half of middle school students and 70 percent of high school students were in a school that had an exclusive beverage contract in 2012. Such contracts also were more prevalent in schools with more students from lower-income families.
- Companies were 41 percent more likely to offer incentives and 22 percent more likely to offer a share of vending beverage profits to high schools that had a high percentage of students from lower-income families than they were to more affluent schools.
- Many students also attended schools that sold branded foods and beverages during lunch. In 2012, 10 percent of elementary, 18 percent of middle, and 30 percent of high school students had fast food available once a week. One percent of elementary, 9 percent of middle, and 19 percent of high school students had daily access to fast food during lunch.

“The nation’s children and adolescents spend a lot of time in school, and our research shows that food and beverage companies are taking advantage of them as a captive audience,” said Yvonne Terry-McElrath, survey research associate at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research and lead author of the study. “There is a clear and urgent need for policies that will protect kids from exposure to unhealthy marketing practices in our nation’s schools.”

In 2009, food and beverage companies spent \$149 million on in-school marketing, but there are currently limited policy and regulatory efforts to address such activity. The Federal Trade Commission in 2008 called on companies to voluntarily end in-school promotion of unhealthy products. Maine passed the first state law attempting to limit the marketing of unhealthy foods in schools in 2007, but research shows it has not been well implemented. In 2011, only 9 percent of public high school districts in the country prohibited such marketing.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap (BTG) 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. BTG is a joint project of the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org or follow BTG on Twitter at [@BTGRsearch](https://twitter.com/BTGRsearch).

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