

news release

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States, School Districts Help Keep Junk Foods and Sugary Drinks Out of Elementary Schools

Study shows policies that limit the sale of unhealthy fare in schools are working, yet many states and districts lack such policies

Chicago, June 10, 2013—Elementary schools are less likely to sell candy, ice cream, sugary drinks, cookies, cakes, and other unhealthy snacks when states or school districts have policies that limit the sale of such items, according to a study published today in *JAMA Pediatrics*. The study also found that more than three-quarters of the nation's public elementary schools are located in a state and/or district that does not specifically limit sales of sugary drinks, candy, salty snacks, or high-fat milk.

The study, which was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through its national research program, Bridging the Gap, is the first to examine the association between state laws, school district policies, and the availability of unhealthy snack foods and drinks in U.S. elementary schools. Researchers assessed the types of foods and drinks offered in vending machines, à la carte lines, and stores in a nationwide sample of schools between 2008–09 and 2010–11.

“We found that states and districts can influence the types of snacks and drinks sold at school,” said lead author Jamie Chriqui, PhD, MHS, an investigator at Bridging the Gap. “These policies can go a long way in helping kids have healthy choices during the school day, but more states and districts need to get strong policies on the books to have a meaningful impact nationally.”

According to the study, state laws and school district policies that set nutritional guidelines for school snacks are generally working to reduce students' access to junk foods—and policies at both levels reinforce each other.

- For example, 43.5 percent of schools sold candy, ice cream, cookies, and other sweets when there was no policy, compared with 32.2 percent of schools that sold them when both the state and district limited the sugar content of snack foods.
- Similarly, when states and districts limited the fat content of snack foods, ice cream was less available (10.3% with a policy vs. 21.3% with no policy) and so were cookies, cakes, and other high-fat baked goods (11.6% with a policy vs. 25.2% with no policy).

For sugar-sweetened beverages, district policies had more influence than state laws. Sugary drinks were less available when the district banned them (3.6% with a policy vs. 13.1% with no policy). When states banned sugary drinks, schools were not less likely to sell them. This was especially true in the South, where one-quarter of schools located in states that banned the sale of sugary drinks still sold them.

The authors noted that many states and districts lacked specific nutritional guidelines for school snacks and drinks:

- 78 percent of elementary schools were located in a district and state that did not limit the sodium content of snacks or prohibit high-fat milk.
- 77 percent of elementary schools were located in a district and state that did not prohibit the sale of candy.
- 75 percent of elementary schools were located in a district and state that did not prohibit the sale of all sugary drinks, including sports drinks, sodas, and other fruit drinks with added sugar.
- 58 percent of elementary schools were located in a district and state that did not limit the sugar content of snacks.

“Too many of our nation’s schools are still selling junk foods and sugary drinks to young children,” said Chriqui. “But the good news is that this is the first generation of children to be enrolled in school at a time when educators and policy-makers are focused on preventing childhood obesity—that’s why it’s so critical to enact or change policies that make schools healthier places for students.”

Currently the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is working to improve its rule on school snack foods and drinks. The findings from this study confirm the need for strong federal standards because so many states and districts do not have their own policies. This study also shows that state and district policies have the potential to help implement the federal guidelines—and if necessary, to go beyond those guidelines to ensure that all students have healthy choices at school.

“Right now, states and districts are very inconsistent when it comes to standards for school snacks and drinks, so it’s crucial for USDA to issue a strong final rule and to do it quickly,” said C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, senior scientist at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “But a strong federal rule is just the beginning, states and districts can—and should—take measures to exceed national standards to further improve the nutritional quality of school foods and drinks.”

The study, “Competitive food and beverage policy contributions at the elementary level,” examined the food policies at 1,485 elementary schools in 957 districts and 45 states and the beverage policies at 1,497 elementary schools in 962 districts and 45 states.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program 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.

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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