

School Foods Report Card 2007

Fueled by concerns about childhood obesity and children's poor diets, a number of states have strengthened their school nutrition policies. Such policies are important for children's health and supporting parents' efforts to feed their children healthfully.

To determine the progress states have made in improving the nutritional quality of school foods, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) evaluated the school nutrition policies of all 50 states and the District of Columbia regarding foods and beverages sold outside of the school meal programs through vending machines, a la carte (i.e., foods sold individually in the cafeteria), school stores, and fundraisers. Each state policy was graded based on five key considerations: 1) beverage nutrition standards; 2) food nutrition standards; 3) grade level(s) to which policies apply; 4) time during the school day to which policies apply; and 5) location(s) on campus to which policies apply. These evaluation criteria are the same as those used in our June 2006 School Foods Report Card.

Over the last ten years, states have been strengthening their school nutrition policies. However, overall, our results show that the changes occurring at the state level, while positive, are fragmented, incremental, and not happening quickly enough to reach all schools in a timely way.

The nation has a patchwork of policies addressing the nutritional quality of school foods and beverages and two-thirds of states have weak or no policies. No states received an A grade, though two states (Kentucky and Oregon) received an A-. Fifteen states received a B grade. Fourteen states received Cs or Ds. Twenty states received Fs.

Only eleven states (22%) have comprehensive school food and beverage nutrition standards that apply to the whole campus and the whole school day at all grade levels. More often states have school nutrition standards that only apply to foods and beverages sold in the cafeteria during meal periods, or that apply only to foods and beverages sold up until the end of the last lunch period.

More states have policies to address soda sales in schools than to address any other nutritional consideration. Twenty-six states prohibit the sale of sugary soft drinks in schools in at least some grade levels. Of those twenty-six states, 42% (11 states) do not prohibit the sale of soda in high schools and 27% (7 states) prohibit the sale of soda only during the meal periods or up through the

end of the last lunch period. (No state is allowed to let schools sell soda in the cafeteria during meal times due to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) national policy.)

Only six states limit the sale of high-fat whole and 2% milk in schools (milk is the biggest source of saturated fat for most children). Fifteen states limit the sale of sports drinks in some schools, although only five states limit the sale of sports drinks in high schools. Eleven states limit portion sizes for beverages, and thirteen states limit portion sizes for snacks. While fifteen states limit the saturated-fat content of school snacks, only ten address trans fat, which, gram-for-gram, is even worse for children's hearts and health. Just five states set limits on sodium. Twenty-five states limit added sugars in school snack foods.

Two states - Georgia and South Carolina - only have school nutrition policies for elementary schools (and received low grades as a result). Four states - Arizona, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Tennessee - have school nutrition policies for elementary and middle schools, but not for high schools.

Over the last two decades, rates of obesity have tripled in children and adolescents, and only 2% of children eat a diet that is healthy according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) criteria. Nationally, 33% of elementary schools, 71% of middle/junior high schools, and 89% of high schools sell foods and beverages out of vending machines, school stores, or a la carte in the cafeteria. The most common items sold include sugary drinks, chips, candy, cookies, and snack cakes. The sale of those foods can negatively affect children's diets, since many are high in calories, added sugars, and fat and low in nutrients.

Federally-subsidized school meals are required to meet detailed nutrition standards set by Congress and the USDA. However, USDA's policy regarding foods sold outside of meals is woefully out of date. Also, USDA does not have authority to regulate foods sold outside the cafeteria or outside of meal times. USDA's policy does not allow "foods of minimal nutritional value" (FMNV) to be sold in the food service area during meal times. But those foods can be sold at any other time or place. USDA defines FMNV as foods that provide less than 5% of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI) for each of eight specified nutrients per serving. Thus, only foods like jelly beans, popsicles, and soft drinks are prohibited. Ironically, though, seltzer water is also forbidden, while candy bars are allowed.

Nutrition science has evolved since USDA implemented its nutrition standards in the 1970s. Over the past several decades, over-consumption of calories, saturated fat, trans fat, refined sugars, and sodium have increasingly become problems in children's diets. Those constituents are not addressed by USDA's school nutrition standards. The national nutrition standards no longer make sense from the standpoint of science, current dietary patterns, and health.

Since the Truman Administration, school meals have been regulated primarily at the federal level. There are strong national standards for meals. There also should be strong national nutrition standard for foods and beverages sold in schools outside of reimbursable meals.

Given the rising rates of childhood obesity and the poor state of children's diets, the time has come to update the national school nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold out of vending machines, school stores, a la carte, and other school venues. The sale of junk food and sugary drinks in schools is a national problem that needs a national solution.