

REPORT BRIEF • APRIL 2007

NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR FOODS IN SCHOOLS: LEADING THE WAY TOWARD HEALTHIER YOUTH

Research has shown that the school environment has a vital role in shaping children's health behaviors. The rise in obesity over the past 2-3 decades has been accompanied by an increase in the number of alternative food options available on school campuses. These "competitive foods" that are obtained from a variety of sources, including à la carte service in the school cafeteria, school stores and snack bars, and vending machines, are vying with the traditional breakfast and lunch offered through federally reimbursable school nutrition programs. Children spend the majority of their day at school, often staying for after-school activities; the foods and beverages available during and after school can contribute a number of calories to their total daily consumption.

Children in the United States are becoming more overweight and obese, putting them at risk for serious health concerns such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and elevated cholesterol and blood pressure levels. In addition to the risk of obesity-related health concerns, poor food choices could lead to other health concerns, like osteoporosis from inadequate calcium intake.

In response to growing concerns over obesity, national attention has focused on the need to establish school nutrition standards and limit access to competitive foods. As a result, over the past few years, school nutrition policy initiatives have been put into place at federal, state, and local levels. Two important federal initiatives have enhanced school health-related policy efforts. First, in 1994, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) developed the Coordinated School Health Program, comprised of eight interactive components to improve students' health. The second initiative was the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, passed in 2004, which required that local education agencies develop a wellness policy for schools to address the problem of childhood obesity by 2006. However, responses of school districts to meeting wellness policy requirements have not been consistent.

Thus, to augment local wellness policies, Congress directed the CDC to undertake a study with the Institute of Medicine (IOM) to review and make recommendations about appropriate nutritional stands for the availability, sale, content and consumption of foods at school, with attention on competitive foods. The ensuing report, *Nutrition Standards for Healthy Schools: Leading the Way Toward Healthier Youth*, concluded that federally-reimbursable school nutrition programs should be the main source of nutrition at school, and opportunities for competitive foods should be limited. However, if competitive foods are available, they should consist of nutritious fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk and dairy products, consistent with



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the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), to help children and adolescents develop healthful lifelong eating patterns.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EATING HEALTHY AT SCHOOL

The IOM report lays out a set of guiding principles to support the creation of healthful eating environments for U.S. school children, as shown in Box 1.

Box 1. Guiding Principles

The committee's findings are:

B. The committee's findings are:

ORGANIZING FOODS AND BEVERAGES INTO A TIER SYSTEM

The authoring committee systemically organized foods and beverages offered separately from federally-reimbursable school nutrition programs into two tiers according to their consistency with the DGA, as shown in Table 1.

Tier 1 foods and beverages provide at least one serving of fruit, vegetables and/or whole grains, or nonfat/low-fat dairy products and are foods to be encouraged. Tier 2 foods and beverages fall short of meeting Tier 1 criteria, but they do not fall outside the DGA recommendations, and so are allowed, but only in specific circumstances. The committee recommends that plain, potable water is available throughout the school day at no cost to students.

TABLE 1. Foods and Beverages That Meet Tier 1 and Tier 2 Standards

Foods

Beverages

Tier 1 for All Students

Tier 1 foods and beverages provide at least one serving of fruit, vegetables and/or whole

place milk and 100% juice when they are chosen at mealtimes, these competitive beverages should be allowed only in high schools, and only after the school day has ended.

high schools could allow Tier 2 items after school to be used for on-campus fundraising as well. For evening and community acupities that include adults, Tier 1 and 2 foods and beverages are encouraged.

Caffeine

CONCLUSION

