School Food and Nutrition Policy

Good nutrition is essential for children’s healthy growth and development. It can also prevent chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. State legislators can take action to help schools increase student access to healthy foods and beverages in several ways, including supporting efforts to implement higher nutrition standards, and providing incentives to businesses and school districts to offer fresh fruits and vegetables to students. Several states have taken action to implement higher nutrition standards in schools and to restrict access to unhealthy foods during the school day. In addition states have taken action to highlight the benefits and importance of healthy eating and living.

In addition to providing an environment that is conducive to learning, our schools must also offer an environment that is conducive to good health. This concept has both federal and state-level support. In 2004, the USDA Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, a federal initiative, required all school districts to develop wellness policies to address nutrition and physical activity by the beginning of the 2006 school year. States also are stepping up. Since 2003, at least 18 states have adopted school nutrition guidelines beyond those required by the USDA through legislative bills, executive orders, rules and regulations.

By implementing and supporting nutrition policies that make healthy foods and beverages available to students, state legislators, superintendents, principals and teachers can help maintain an environment in schools that encourages student achievement and inspires healthy behaviors.

To help schools increase student access to healthy foods and beverages, state legislators can:

- Support schools’ efforts to implement higher nutrition standards for foods provided on campus;
- Provide leadership across agriculture, health and education committees and state agencies to begin addressing nutrition in schools while advancing local agriculture and economic interests;

Good nutrition is not only essential for children’s healthy growth and development, it also prevents chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Children with unbalanced and unhealthy diets are not getting the nutrients they need, and may be consuming too much fat and sugar, which increases their risk for becoming overweight. Academic performance is also at stake—evidence shows that students with healthy diets consistently receive higher scores on achievement tests than undernourished children.

To help schools increase student access to healthy foods and beverages, state legislators can:

- Support schools’ efforts to implement higher nutrition standards for foods provided on campus;
- Provide leadership across agriculture, health and education committees and state agencies to begin addressing nutrition in schools while advancing local agriculture and economic interests;
• Provide incentives to businesses and school districts to offer fresh fruits and vegetables to students; and
• Establish health education standards to teach children about nutrition and the health benefits of eating properly and being physically active.

The Call for Higher Nutrition Standards in Schools

Defining Good Nutrition for Children

Before implementing new school nutrition policies or improving those that already exist, it is essential to understand what constitutes a healthy diet for children. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2005) recommend that children and adolescents increase their intake of fruits, vegetables, whole grain products and fiber-rich foods while limiting their consumption of fats. In addition, children ages 2 to 8 should consume two cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or equivalent milk products, and children 9 and older should consume three cups per day of equivalent milk products.3

Today, the diets of most children in the United States do not meet these federal recommendations.

• Only 1 percent of school-aged children consume the recommended daily number of servings from all five major food groups.
• Only 20.1 percent of children eat five or more servings of fruits or vegetables a day, and only 16.2 percent consume the recommended three or more serving amounts for the milk group.4
• Children drink more soft drinks now than ever before—consumption increased by 41 percent between 1970 and 1994.5 More than 33 percent of teenagers consume more than three servings of soda a day.6
• More than 80 percent of children and adolescents eat too much total fat—it is recommended that no more than 30 percent of total calories come from fat.7
• More than 90 percent of children and adolescents eat too much saturated fat—it is recommended that no more than 10 percent of total calories come from saturated fat.8

Children and adolescents consume an estimated 35 to 45 percent of their daily calories during an average school day.9 Thus, it is crucial that schools offer easy access to a wide variety of healthy, attractive foods and beverages.
School Food Service

Arkansas has been one leader in implementing higher nutrition standards in schools. In 2003, Arkansas House Bill 1583 (Act 1220) was passed as part of a statewide effort to combat childhood obesity in public schools and local communities. Among other provisions, the act called for improved access to healthier foods in schools, creation of local committees to promote physical activity and nutrition, and confidential reporting of each student’s body mass index (BMI) to his or her parents.

This was bolstered in 2004 by Arkansas Senate Bill 965, which provides statewide standards for school lunch programs. In addition to following the National School Lunch Program’s dietary guidelines, each school district must provide its school nutrition and physical activity advisory committees with information on the requirements and standards of the National School Lunch Program and, on a quarterly basis, menus for the National School Lunch Program food (or lunches) as well as other food sold in the school cafeteria. The school nutrition and physical activity advisory committee provides recommendations to the school district concerning menus and other foods sold in the school cafeteria.

California has also been proactive in elevating nutrition standards in schools throughout the state. The Pupil Nutrition, Health and Achievement Act (California Senate Bill 19, enacted in 2001) set new standards for foods sold or provided in schools. The act outlined stringent standards for elementary schools, as well as less strict standards for middle and high schools, and it increased the reimbursement rate for free and reduced-price meals in elementary and middle schools. The act also made planning grants available to pilot schools for costs associated with developing and adopting these policies. Grantees developed and tested a wide array of strategies to increase student access to healthful food and beverage choices. Just a few of these include: increasing points of sale; creatively revamping menus, as in the creation of an International Marketplace featuring cuisines from around the world; and partnering with farmers markets. The California Department of Education reported of the 21-month pilot program that “the results were encouraging, and the positive impact on students was significant.”

Since 2001, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has signed two school nutrition bills to amend Senate Bill 19: Senate Bill 965 and Senate Bill 12, or the “Healthy Schools Now Act,” which established unprecedented, uniform school nutrition guidelines for grades K–12. In addition, Senate Bill 281, enacted in 2005, established the California Fresh Start Pilot Program to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for public school students in grades one through 12.

Both quality and quantity are relevant when considering nutrition standards. Recent state initiatives have restricted access to unhealthy foods as well as portion sizes. For instance, in 2006 Rhode Island enacted House Bill 6968 and Senate Bill 2696, which restrict sweetened beverage sales in schools and mandate that only healthy beverages and snacks may be sold in elementary, middle and junior high schools. Such beverages and snacks are identified as low-fat milk, 100 percent fruit juice or juice-based drinks, vegetable drinks, low-fat yogurt, nuts, seeds, reduced-fat cheese, and whole-wheat and whole-grain snacks. In Connecticut, Senate Bill 373, enacted in 2006, bans the sale of artificially sweetened beverages to students from any source, including school stores, vending machines, and cafeterias. Portion sizes of beverages other than water are restricted to 12 ounces or less.

Beyond School Meal Programs

Implementing school policies that limit access to vending machines and negotiating vending contracts with healthier food and beverage choices are two methods often considered by schools to help address childhood obesity. Six states have passed new laws regarding vending machines in schools, and many more have introduced bills designed to curtail sales of junk food to elementary school students and offer more healthy alternatives in vending machines. One example is Colorado Senate Bill 103, enacted in 2004. It encourages each school district board of education to adopt a policy on or before July 1 provid-

Areas of School Food Policy

Many aspects combine to form school food policy. In terms of meals and snacks offered at school, the following may be important factors:

- **Food or Beverage contracts:** What types of items are offered? Who supplies them? Do contracts support local businesses and farmers when possible, and reward sustainable farming practices?

- **Portion Size:** Limiting portions can help reduce student’s caloric intake, especially when it comes to snacks and beverages.

- **Timing:** Do students have ample time to purchase and enjoy their meals? Could restricted access to vending machines help reduce excess caloric intake?

- **Environment:** Are students offered a pleasant environment in which to eat? Can surroundings be made more appealing? Do students have sufficient access to water fountains?

- **Qualifications of Food Service Staff:** Are professional standards delineated and maintained?

Keep in mind that food may be offered or sold on a variety of occasions. Beyond school meals and vending machines, these may include:

- Afterschool programs, field trips and school events
- Parties, celebrations or meetings
- Food-related fundraising

Wellness education and school nutrition programs are, of course, crucial components of school food policy. Another area to be aware of is the marketing of foods and beverages in school-related settings. Finally, don’t underestimate the importance of school health councils and community and family involvement.
ing that, by the 2006–07 school year, at least 50 percent of all items offered in school district vending machines be healthful foods or beverages that meet acceptable nutritional standards.

It is a common misperception that replacing unhealthy foods such as sugary sodas and snacks with healthier food options will cause a decline in revenues, but research indicates that this may not be the case. Making It Happen! School Nutrition Success Stories showed that schools can make money from selling healthy foods and beverages outside of school meal programs. Of the 17 schools or school districts that reported revenue changes, 12 increased revenue, four maintained revenues and only one experienced a slight decrease in revenues. Moreover, a study in California found that even when school districts required one-time funding to implement such changes, eliminating high-sugar sodas and high-fat chips actually increased food service department revenues.

The following examples illustrate the variety of ways that states have eliminated or reduced access to less healthy food choices.

- **California** Senate Bill 677 was enacted in 2003 to replace carbonated beverages with milk, water and juice in school vending machines. The bill also limits access to vending machines in middle and junior high schools from 30 minutes before the start of the school day to 30 minutes after the end of the school day. The sales of certain beverages at specified school events are exempted.

- **Tennessee** House Bill 2783, enacted in 2004, requires the state board of education, in consultation and cooperation with the departments of education and health, to promulgate rules to establish minimum nutritional standards for individual food items sold or offered for sale to students in grades K–8 through vending machines or other sources, including school nutrition programs. Foods that do not meet requirements may be sold for fundraisers if food items are sold off campus and at least 30 minutes after the end of the school day.

- **Kentucky** Senate Bill 172, enacted in 2005, requires the board of education to issue minimum nutritional standards for competitive foods—food and beverages sold outside of the National School Breakfast and National School Lunch programs. The bill addresses time limitations for the sale of competitive foods and sets forth penalties for violations. It also requires the development of a wellness policy for grades K–5 and sets requirements for food service personnel training and annual assessments of school districts’ nutrition and physical activity environment.

- **Colorado** Senate Bill 81, enacted in 2005, encourages each school district to establish standards for the availability of competitive foods and beverages and to adopt a local wellness policy.

---

**The Intersection of Education, Health, Agriculture and Economy**

One way to increase students’ access to healthy foods is to provide incentives to businesses and school districts to offer fresh fruits and vegetables to students. **Connecticut** Senate Bill 373, enacted in 2006, allows local control over food sold in schools. However, it provides a unique financial incentive for schools to offer healthy foods. School districts participating in the National School Lunch Program must decide and report to the state Department of Education each year whether they will offer only food items that meet restrictive standards published by the department. Districts that do so will receive from the state an additional 10 cents per lunch—a substantial increase from the current rate of 5 cents per lunch.

School nutrition policies have far-reaching implications. State legislators can play an important role by providing leadership across agriculture, health and education committees and state agencies. **Oklahoma** exemplifies how innovative and cross-cutting thinking has supported interests in all these areas while enhancing school nutrition. **Oklahoma** House Bill 2655, enacted in 2006, created the Oklahoma Farm to School Program, which is designed to provide
schools with fresh and minimally processed farm commodities for inclusion in school meals and snacks. The bill also aims to improve Oklahoma farmers’ incomes and direct access to markets. The program’s activities include hands-on learning opportunities, such as farm visits, cooking demonstrations, school gardening and composting programs, and the integration of nutrition and agriculture education into school curricula.

New York is another state where the effort to encourage consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables has been made hand-in-hand with supporting local farmers. New York House Bill 2652, enacted in 2004, changed purchasing laws for schools to buy from farming associations and increased maximums on direct purchases. It also required the state Department of Education to work with the Department of Agriculture and Markets to promulgate regulations enhancing the competitiveness of local farmers’ goods in the school food market.

Colorado actually created a program for providing free fruits and vegetables to students in public schools. Enacted in 2006, Senate Bill 127 requires that Colorado produce be used in the program to the maximum extent possible. It also dictates that, when feasible, at least 75% of students participating in the program should be from school districts in which at least 50% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch under the National School Lunch Program.

Health and Nutrition Education

Education is a critical part of encouraging healthy habits in youth. Some states have taken steps to highlight the benefits and importance of healthy eating and living. For instance, Texas House Resolution 500, adopted in 2005, recognized March 7–11, 2005, as Texas School Lunch Week and commended the Texas Association for School Nutrition and its members for their dedication and service in promoting the health and education of school children through their implementation of the school lunch program in Texas.

Similarly, California statutes, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 214, Resolution Chapter 58, adopted in 2004, proclaimed April 26–30, 2004, to be “YEAH!: Youth Eating and Acting Healthy!: Children’s Fitness and Nutrition Week 2004.” Legislators were urged to work with various partners to support fitness and nutrition events that encouraged children to learn about and participate in nutritious eating, physical activity and self-esteem building. Partners included parents, schools, children’s programs and organizations, and community groups.

California has also recognized the significant role played by advertising media. California statutes, Senate Joint Resolution 29, Resolution Chapter 140, adopted in 2004, requested that federal officials and private industries address advertising and marketing of foods and beverages to children. The resolution petitions
the U.S. Congress and the president to require the Federal Communications Commission to ensure that equal time is given during television programs that have a significant youth audience to encourage fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity, and to discourage the consumption of low-nutrient foods and beverages. It also requests that the federal government fund new and existing media campaigns to promote healthy eating and physical activity.

Some states have acted to ensure that nutrition education is made a regular part of comprehensive curricula teaching healthy living skills. Hawaii Senate Resolution 12, adopted in 2004, requests that the Hawaii state Department of Education develop and require an elementary school-level physical education program for public schools as part of the curriculum. The program should include instruction by physical education specialists with baccalaureate degrees, require 30 minutes of daily physical education and instruction in healthy eating habits and provide for individualized activities.

Washington is another state that has implemented health education standards incorporating nutrition education as part of a broader approach. Washington Senate Bill 5436, enacted in 2004, brought together the Washington state school directors association, the office of the superintendent of public instruction, the Department of Health, and the Washington Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance to create an advisory committee and develop a model policy regarding access to nutritious foods and opportunities for developmentally appropriate exercise. The bill required the model policy to address the nutritional content of foods and beverages sold or provided throughout the school day and the availability and quality of health, nutrition and physical education curricula. It also required the advisory committee to submit the model policy for adoption by the governor and legislature and to post it online by Jan. 1, 2005. The bill required each district’s board of directors to establish its own policy by Aug. 1, 2005. Links to both the model policy and examples of local policies adopted in response to Senate Bill 5436 can be found at the Healthy Schools in Washington Web site (www.depts.washington.edu/waschool/KeyResources.html#model).

Assessing the Environment

In many states, studies and commissions have been mandated to assess how best to improve food service, enhance health and nutrition education,
and promote healthy living in schools. The following examples illustrate the diversity of such efforts.

- In 2005, Kansas adopted Senate Concurrent Resolution 1604 requesting that the Kansas Department of Education study the state’s public schools food programs, the availability of other food items on school premises, and the availability of classes that promote health and physical fitness. In addition, Senate Bill 154 dictates that the state board of education consider providing healthy foods and beverages, physical activities, and wellness education to prevent and reduce childhood obesity.

- Illinois House Resolution 147, adopted in 2003, authorizes the Department of Public Health and the state Board of Education to undertake a study to determine the effects of sugar consumption on school children’s health.

- North Carolina House Bill 1409, enacted in 2004, dictates that, as part of the “Healthy Studies Act of 2004,” the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee may study school nutrition and opportunities for physical activity to maintain children’s health.

- Louisiana Senate Bill 871, enacted in 2004, required all public elementary schools to provide at least 30 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, beginning with the 2004–05 school year. It required compliance reporting for school districts and a pilot program in various regions of the state to assess student fitness and nutrition and interventions to limit unhealthy foods in schools.

- Hawaii Senate Resolution 7, adopted in 2005, requests that the Department of Education submit a report on the number of schools in the state that have established produce gardens and the progress of implementing such gardens into school curricula and school nutrition programs. The report must be submitted prior to the 2007 legislative session.

- Tennessee Senate Joint Resolution 38, adopted in 2005, created a special legislative joint committee to study the full and expanded implementation of the Coordinated School Health Improvement Act of 1999 and compliance with the reauthorized federal Child Nutrition Act in Tennessee.

- Iowa Senate Bill 2251, enacted in 2006, established the Healthy Children Task Force to develop recommendations for policy and statutory changes to enhance the health and well-being of children, including—but not limited to—physical activity, food and nutrition, and education related to these topics.

Conclusion
While state legislators and communities have made progress in addressing childhood obesity by implementing and supporting promising school nutrition policies, there is still more work to be done. It is possible for schools to balance the requirements necessary to meet rigorous and sound academic and nutritional standards, but strong state leadership is essential. State-level support and commitment to providing nutritious foods and health education in schools can make a significant difference in ensuring that today’s children grow up healthy and adopt healthy habits that will last them a lifetime.

---This publication was originally prepared by Michael Fierro and Debra Lightsey of Bearing Point Inc. and updated by staff of The Council of State Governments (CSG). Funding for this publication was provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) under Cooperative Agreement Number U38/CCR424348 and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Its contents are the responsibility of CSG’s health policy staff and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC, RWJF or CSG.
Sources


8. Ibid.

