



Creating Supportive School Nutrition Environments

Good nutrition is vital to optimal health.^{1,2} The school environment plays a fundamental role in shaping lifelong healthy behaviors and can have a powerful influence on students' eating habits. A supportive school nutrition environment includes multiple elements: access to healthy and appealing foods and beverages available to students in school meals, vending machines, school stores, à la carte lines in the cafeteria, fundraisers, and classroom parties; consistent messages about food and healthy eating; and the opportunities students have to learn about healthy eating. Improving the school nutrition environment has the potential to improve students' physical health and academic achievement.³⁻⁸

BACKGROUND

The *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004*,⁹ and more recently the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*,¹⁰ required that school districts have a wellness policy that includes nutrition guidelines for all foods and beverages available during the school day, as well as goals for nutrition promotion and nutrition education.

What Do the Experts Recommend?

In addition to the federal local wellness policy requirement, several national organizations, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Institute of Medicine, and American Academy of Pediatrics, have made recommendations for schools to implement policies and practices that support healthy eating. These recommendations include ensuring that all foods available during the school day are healthy and appealing, limiting students' exposure to marketing for low-nutrient, high calorie foods, implementing Farm to School programs, and providing nutrition education.^{6,7,11-15}

What is this Brief About?

School districts nationwide have taken a variety of steps to create supportive nutrition environments through policy change. The following discussion highlights areas

where policy opportunities exist, as well as areas where policies are well-established relative to the following topics: 1) nutrition standards for competitive foods and beverages (i.e., items sold or served outside the school meal programs); 2) marketing and promotion of foods and beverages at school; 3) access to free drinking water; 4) nutrition education for students; 5) Farm to School programs and school gardens; 6) nutrition-related training for school personnel; and 7) strategies to increase participation in school meals. This brief summarizes the range of policy actions taken by public school districts from a nationally representative sample of district wellness policies from the 2012–2013 school year, from the Bridging the Gap (BTG) study. All policies were collected and coded by BTG researchers using a standardized method based on evidence-based guidelines and recommendations from expert organizations and agencies.^{15,16} Complete details about how these data were collected and compiled are available in the companion methods documentation.¹⁷



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WHAT ACTIONS HAVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS TAKEN?

Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods and Beverages

Competitive food and beverage policy provisions varied by location of sale within the school, specific nutrient restrictions, and grade level. During the 2012–2013 school year, the BTG study found that

- The most common restrictions regarding competitive foods were for vending machines, followed by school stores and à la carte lines in the cafeteria. Few districts had policy restrictions regarding class parties (Figure 1).
- The data showed that the highest percentage of policies included requirements for limiting fats in foods, and the smallest percentage of policies included requirements for limits on sodium. Similarly, Figure 2 shows fat content was restricted by the wellness policy in more locations, whereas sodium was restricted in fewer locations. This was consistent for all school levels.
- Policy prohibitions on soda sales were addressed in more locations; fewer locations had policy provisions that prohibited the sale of other sugar-sweetened beverages or high-fat milks (Figure 3).
- Use of food as a reward for good behavior or academic achievement is common in elementary schools.¹⁸ The current BTG study found that only 12% of districts prohibit using food as a reward.

Marketing and Promotion of Foods and Beverages

The ways in which foods and beverages are marketed and promoted can affect students' eating behaviors.¹³ During the 2012–2013 school year,

- 13% of districts prohibited all forms of advertising and promotion of unhealthful choices (e.g., prohibiting soft drink logos on school materials or property).
- 5% of districts promoted marketing of healthful items or used strategies to encourage healthy choices (e.g., priced nutritious foods and beverages at a lower

cost and increased the price of less nutritious foods and beverages).

Access to Free Drinking Water on School Campuses

Providing and promoting drinking water throughout the day gives students an alternative to sugar-sweetened beverages.

During the 2012–2013 school year,

- Only 10% of districts required free access to drinking water throughout the school day.
- Just 9% of districts required free access to drinking water during school meals.

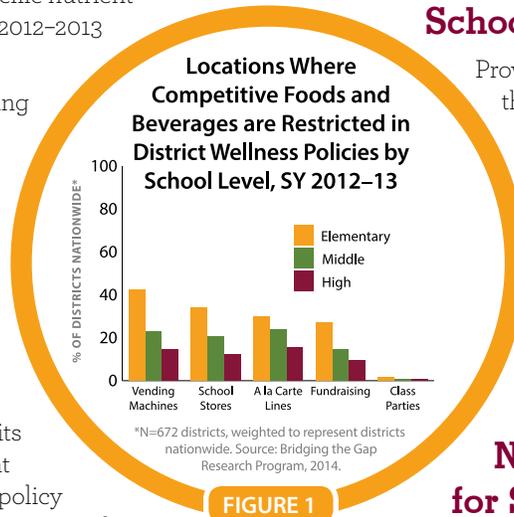


FIGURE 1

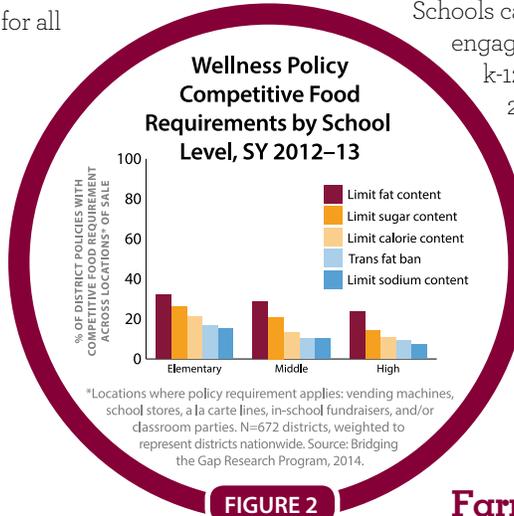


FIGURE 2

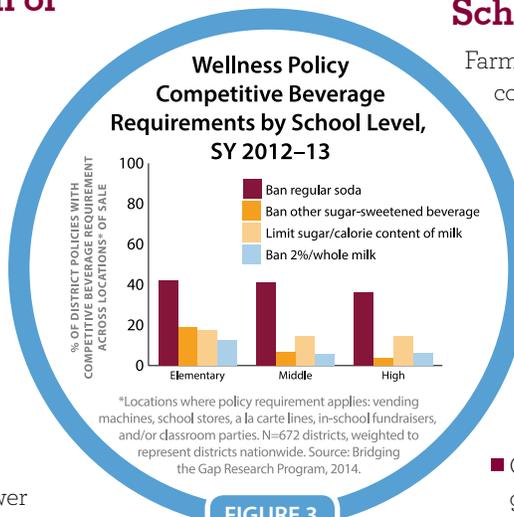


FIGURE 3

Nutrition Education for Students

Schools can provide nutrition education and engage in nutrition promotion as part of the k-12 health education curriculum. During the 2012–2013 school year,

- Slightly more than one-half (52%) of districts required skill-based nutrition education.
- Only 37% of districts required a nutrition education curriculum to be provided for each grade level.
- Less than 1% of district policies required a specific number of nutrition education courses or contact hours.

Farm to School Programs and School Gardens

Farm to School programs and school gardens connect schools and local farms with the objective of serving locally produced foods in school cafeterias and providing nutrition education opportunities such as cooking demonstrations, taste tests, and farm tours. During the 2012–2013 school year,

- Slightly less than 1% of district policies required Farm to School programs or locally-grown food to be purchased for school meals.
- Only 1% of districts required a school garden.

Nutrition-Related Training for School Personnel

Properly trained staff at all levels are essential for creating a supportive school nutrition environment.⁶ Professional development may include teaching district staff how to implement an age-appropriate nutrition education curriculum, integrate nutrition topics into the overall curriculum, as well as training food service staff to prepare or serve healthy and appealing school meals. During the 2012–2013 school year,

- 11% of districts required nutrition education training or professional development for all district staff.
- 8% of districts required nutrition education training or professional development for food service staff.

Policy Strategies to Increase Participation in School Meals

Districts can implement a variety of strategies including scheduling recess before lunch at the elementary school level, instituting closed campus policies at the secondary level (i.e., students cannot leave campus for lunch), providing adequate time to eat meals (10 minutes per day for breakfast and 20 minutes per day for lunch), and offering grab-and-go breakfast. In addition, districts can engage students and other stakeholders in the decision making process through taste-testing of new foods and satisfaction surveys to improve school meal participation. Figure 4 illustrates the strategies required during the 2012–2013 school year.

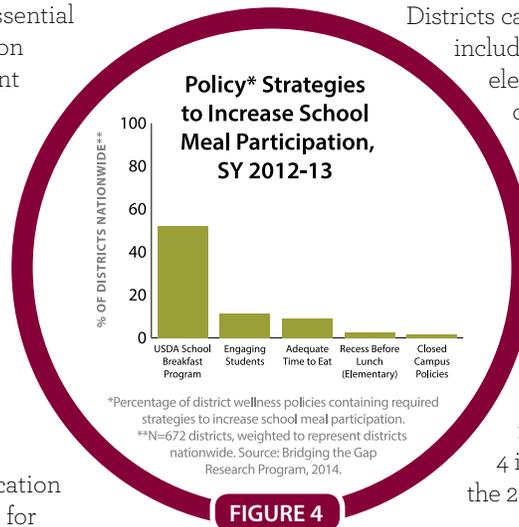


FIGURE 4

Supporting the School Nutrition Environment

The following evidence-based strategies and expert recommendations provide examples of policies and practices that could be implemented locally.^{6,7,11-15} See the Resources section at the end for links to documents and Web sites that provide additional information.

STATES

- Provide training and technical assistance to districts on revising district wellness policies to align with national recommendations.
- Assist districts with monitoring and reporting on the implementation of district wellness policies.
- Educate districts and relevant state groups on elements of a healthy school nutrition environment including nutrition standards that meet or exceed the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) "Smart Snacks in School" nutrition standards for all foods sold in school.
- Work to develop Farm to School programs.
- Work with districts to update school kitchens with the equipment needed to prepare healthy meals

(e.g., slicers, sectioners, and reach-in coolers to prepare and store fruits and vegetables).

- Provide nutrition training and professional development opportunities for district and food service staff.
- Support standards-based nutrition education for districts and schools.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

- Create a school health council that includes district and community stakeholders to assess, implement, monitor, and evaluate the district wellness policy.
- Review and revise the district wellness policy to align with national recommendations, and assist schools with implementing the policy.
- Implement strong nutrition standards that meet or exceed the USDA's "Smart Snacks in School" nutrition standards for all foods sold in school.
- Make the district wellness policy and nutrition

What Can You Do?

standards publicly available to parents and other stakeholders (e.g., district Web site), and involve them in reviewing and revising these policies.

- Prohibit marketing of unhealthful items, and promote more healthful items.
- Encourage school staff to model healthy eating behaviors.
- Link nutrition education activities with State Health Education Frameworks or Standards.
- Provide nutrition training and professional development opportunities for all school staff.
- Provide parents with nutrition education materials.
- Adopt strategies to improve school meal participation rates, including ensuring adequate time for students to eat meals, incorporating alternative breakfast options, and conducting taste tests.
- Ensure that all students have access to free drinking water during the school day.

RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Healthy Youth! Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/npao/>.
- USDA Healthy Meals Resource System. School Nutrition Environment and Wellness Resources. <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/school-wellness-resources>.
- USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Local School Wellness Policies. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy>.
- USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Smart Snacks in School. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/smart-snacks-schools>.
- USDA Team Nutrition. <http://www.teamnutrition.usda.gov/>.



- USDA Farm to School. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool>.
- National Food Service Management Institute. <http://www.nfsmi.org/>.
- Let's Move. Schools Take Action: 5 Simple Steps to Success. http://www.letsmove.gov/sites/letsmove.gov/files/pdfs/TAKE_ACTION_SCHOOLS.pdf.
- Bridging the Gap Research. School district wellness policy-related reports and materials. http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/research/district_wellness_policies.

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