

news release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information, contact:

Kathryn Thomas
609-627-5937
kthomas@rwjf.org

Availability of Sugary Sodas in U.S. Middle and High Schools Declines Significantly

Sports drinks, other sugary beverages still widely available

Princeton, NJ, August 6, 2012 – One in four U.S. public high school students could buy regular soda in school during the 2010-11 school year, down from more than half who could do so just four years earlier, according to a new study published today in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. The percentage of students in middle school who could buy soda also decreased, from 27 percent in 2006-07 to 13 percent in 2010-11.

Despite schools' progress in removing sodas, many middle and high school students still have widespread access to other sugary beverages, such as fruit drinks and sports drinks. In the 2010-11 school year, 63 percent of middle and 88 percent of high school students could buy some type of sugary drink at school.

The study examined the availability of competitive beverages in U.S. middle and high schools for five academic years, from 2006-07 to 2010-11. Competitive beverages are those sold by schools outside of meal programs, through vending machines, à la carte lines in the cafeteria, school stores, and snack bars.

“Our study shows that, although schools are making progress, far too many students still are surrounded by a variety of unhealthy beverages at school,” said Yvonne Terry-McElrath, MSA, a researcher from the University of Michigan and lead author of the study. “We also know that the problem gets worse as students get older.” Terry-McElrath is a co-investigator with Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study.

According to Terry-McElrath, the high availability of sugar-sweetened beverages in schools was largely driven by sports drinks, which were available to 55 percent of middle and 83 percent of high school students in 2010-11. Sports drinks contain unhealthy amounts of added sugar and salt. Leading health authorities [recommend](#) sports drinks only for serious athletes engaged in vigorous physical activity, and do not recommend selling them in schools.

Other key findings from the study:

- Although the number of middle school students with access to sports drinks declined significantly, from 72 percent to 55 percent, the same did not hold true for high school students. Eighty-three percent still had access to sports drinks in 2010-11, a statistically insignificant drop from the 90 percent who did in 2006-07.
- Although access to higher-fat milks (including 2% milk) declined among both middle and high school students, such beverages remained available to more than a third (36 percent) of middle school students and nearly half (48 percent) of high school students.
- Access to healthier drinks remained relatively stable for high school students and showed a small but statistically significant decline for middle school students, from 96 percent to 89 percent. Access to lower-fat milks stayed level among students at both school levels, and access to bottled water stayed roughly the same for high school students. For middle school students, there was a slight decline in access to bottled water, likely due to the removal of vending machines from some schools.

In analyzing the results, Terry-McElrath and her colleagues point to other research noting that sweetened beverages are the main source of dietary sugar among children and that having such drinks at school has been found to significantly contribute to students' daily calorie intake.

This study, along with [a similar one](#) Bridging the Gap recently conducted on elementary schools, comes as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prepares to update national standards for competitive foods and beverages in schools. The nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold outside of the school meals program were last updated more than 30 years ago. Although the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 authorized the USDA to update them, it has yet to put forth a new proposal.

“The progress being made to remove sugary sodas from our nation’s middle and high schools is encouraging,” said C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, senior scientist at RWJF. “But while this study does have good news, it also shows that we’re not yet where we want to be. It’s critically important for the USDA to set strong standards for competitive foods and beverages to help ensure that *all* students across all grades have healthy choices at school.”

In conducting the study, the researchers used nationally representative data from U.S. public schools with 8th, 10th or 12th grades. They analyzed responses from more than 1,400 middle schools and more than 1,500 high schools.

#

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

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, measurable, and timely change.

For 40 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org. **Follow the Foundation on Twitter** www.rwjf.org/twitter **or Facebook** www.rwjf.org/facebook.