

news release

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New Study Shows School District Wellness Policies Fail to Restrict Student Access to Unhealthy Foods and Beverages

Chicago, August 10, 2010 – School district wellness policies across the country are weak and often not aligned with national recommendations for nutrition or physical activity, according to a study released today by the national research program Bridging the Gap. Yet the report finds that many districts have exceeded requirements of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 by setting more stringent standards for school meals or addressing issues not required by the Act, such as physical education.

Guidelines for foods and beverages sold outside of school meal programs continue to be markedly lax and many do not comply with the federal mandate. Those competitive foods and beverages, as they are called, are part of the congressional debate on the Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Such foods and beverages are largely unregulated and linked with excess calorie consumption and obesity among school-age children, who typically buy them through school stores, vending machines and à la carte cafeteria lines.

The new report compares districts' wellness policy guidelines with the 2007 Institute of Medicine (IOM) nutritional standards for competitive products sold in schools. Those standards, which are more stringent than the requirements of the Act, call for offering more produce and whole grains; decreasing unhealthy fats, added sugars, salt and calories; and prohibiting sugar-sweetened beverages.

Key findings from the 2008–09 school year include:

- Many districts' guidelines for competitive products applied to either foods or beverages but not both, or they applied to vending machines and à la carte cafeteria lines, but not to other school locations that sold competitive products.
- No district met all of the IOM standards for competitive products, and guidelines restricting sugar-sweetened beverages and sodium content of snacks were especially weak.
- While not required by the Act, most districts had provisions for physical education (PE). Yet such policies generally were not aligned with evidence-based guidelines for time spent

in PE or recommendations for engaging students in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.

- The vast majority of districts did not identify a funding source to support implementation of wellness policy provisions, and very few had plans for evaluating implementation efforts or reporting on schools' compliance.

“Districts have improved their wellness policies and many have even gone beyond what’s required by the federal mandate, but the majority still have lax policies on the books when it comes to nutrition and physical activity,” said lead author Jamie Chriqui, Ph.D., M.H.S., of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Bridging the Gap, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). “Based on a scale of 1 to 100, the average strength score for wellness policies was 35 or lower for elementary, middle and high schools—and that’s a failing grade by everyone’s standards.”

The authors stress the importance of using the new findings to inform federal reauthorization of both the Child Nutrition Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and to help guide recent recommendations of the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity.

School District Wellness Policies: Evaluating Progress and Potential for Improving Children’s Health Three Years after the Federal Mandate analyzes written wellness policies from the 2006–07, 2007–08 and 2008–09 school years—the years immediately following the required adoption date for these policies. Findings are based on nationally representative samples of school districts. RWJF funded the research through Bridging the Gap.

The report is available online at www.bridgingthegapresearch.org.

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