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For more information, contact:

Laurie Lennon
(704) 765-1531
llennon@burnesscommunications.com

Nearly Half of Nation's Youngest Students Can Buy Junk Foods at School

Problem Most Severe in the South, Where Obesity Rates are Highest

Chicago, February 6, 2012 – Nearly half of U.S. elementary school students could buy unhealthy snacks—such as cookies, cakes and baked goods—outside of school meals during the 2009–10 school year, according to a study published today in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*. Schools sold the snacks to students through vending machines, à la carte cafeteria lines and school stores.

Unhealthy snack foods were strikingly more prevalent in schools in the South, where obesity rates are the highest in the nation. About 60 percent of public elementary school students in the South could buy sugary snacks outside of school meals, compared with 24 percent of students in the West and 30 percent in the Midwest.

“The reality is that many young students can buy junk foods at school,” said lead author Lindsey Turner, Ph.D. Turner is a co-investigator with [Bridging the Gap](#), a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study. “Many elementary schools sell unhealthy snacks in multiple locations, including in the cafeteria during lunch,” she noted.

Currently, foods and beverages sold outside of school meals—competitive foods—are virtually exempt from federal regulation. Schools are prohibited only from selling soda, gum and some candies in the cafeteria during lunch time. These products still may be sold elsewhere in the school, even during lunch.

As the authors note, there is now a window of opportunity to improve national standards for competitive foods. In early 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is expected to release proposed nutrition standards for all foods and beverages available outside of school meals.

The study, “Student Access to Competitive Foods in Elementary Schools: Trends over Time and Regional Differences,” presents the most recent data available and is based on nationally representative surveys of schools for four academic years, from 2006–07 to 2009–10. The researchers grouped competitive foods into categories. *Healthy foods* included fruits, vegetables and salad. *Unhealthy foods* were grouped as *sugary* (candy, baked goods, ice cream) and *salty* (pretzels, potato chips).

Findings from the study reveal several important trends:

- Half of public elementary school students had access to competitive foods in 2009–10; more than 90 percent of them could purchase sugary snacks from one or more of the venues, and about two-thirds could buy a healthier option. These percentages have not changed since 2006–07.
- Healthier snacks were less available to students in lower-income public elementary schools (those serving a high percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) than they were to students in higher-income schools.
- Generally, elementary schools in the South offered students more access to all types of competitive foods, including both healthy and unhealthy snacks.

“It’s encouraging to see that some schools are offering healthy snacks, but what would really make a difference is replacing the snacks that are high in fat, sugar and sodium with more nutritious choices,” Turner said. “This is especially important for schools in the South and lower-income schools where so many students already struggle with obesity.”

The authors agree with [recommendations](#) issued by the Institute of Medicine that call for limiting competitive foods to fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lower-fat dairy products. They also note that schools that have replaced unhealthy snacks with healthier options did not lose money, and some actually increased participation in the school lunch program.

“There is great momentum to improve the foods offered in our nation’s schools,” said C. Tracy Orleans, Ph.D., RWJF senior scientist. “We’ve made major progress to update the standards for school meals. Now more than ever, it’s critically important to ensure that the foods and drinks being sold to students outside of meal programs also are nutritious.”

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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

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