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Elementary Schools Removing Sugary Drinks, Limiting Beverage Sales to Healthy Choices

New Study Shows Progress, Need for More Comprehensive Efforts

Chicago, July 2, 2012 - New findings published today in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* reveal encouraging trends in U.S. elementary schools: more schools are offering only healthy choices, like bottled water, 100% juice or lower-fat milk, and fewer schools are offering unhealthy beverages, such as soda, sports drinks and higher-fat milk. However, the study also found that unhealthy beverages remain available to one-third of public elementary school students.

The study examined the availability of competitive beverages in U.S. public elementary 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.

“Elementary schools across the country are improving the beverage landscape, showing that change is possible and it’s already happening,” said lead author Lindsey Turner, PhD. Turner is a co-investigator with Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study. “While the progress is encouraging, too many of our nation’s youngest students can still buy unhealthy drinks at school,” she noted.

Researchers grouped the beverages into categories based on nutrition guidelines developed by the Institute of Medicine (IOM). IOM-approved beverages (or “healthy” beverages) included water, 100% juice and lower-fat (nonfat or 1%) milk. These are the only beverages the IOM recommends offering in elementary schools. Non-approved beverages (or “unhealthy” beverages) included sugar-sweetened drinks, such as soda and sports drinks; higher-fat milk; and low-calorie drinks, such as diet soda and light juices.

Data reveal several important trends over the five-year period:

- Access to all unhealthy beverages in elementary schools peaked in 2007–08, when 47 percent of public elementary students had access to them, and steadily declined to 33 percent of students in 2010–11.

- The percentage of public elementary students who had access to sugar-sweetened beverages decreased from 17 percent in 2006–07 to 12 percent in 2010–11.
- The percentage of public elementary school students who could buy only healthy beverages outside of school meals increased from 10 percent in 2006–07 to 21 percent in 2010–11.
- The percentage of public elementary school students who could buy beverages in any competitive venue peaked at 61 percent in 2008–09 and has subsequently dropped to 55 percent in 2010–11. This is likely because the percentage of schools selling drinks in à la carte lines, stores and snack bars increased until 2008–09, but dropped thereafter.

According to Turner, improvements in school district policies may have contributed to these trends. “Other [recent findings](#) show that some school districts have set policies for competitive foods and beverages that exceed the current weak federal standards,” said Turner. “But many districts, unfortunately, have not made such improvements.”

This research comes as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prepares to update nutrition standards for competitive foods and beverages in schools, which have not been revised in more than 30 years. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 authorized the USDA to set nutrition standards that are aligned with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for all foods and drinks available outside of school meals. USDA is expected to release its proposed rule in the coming months.

“It is encouraging that elementary schools are leading the way to remove unhealthy drinks and offer students healthy options,” said C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, senior scientist at RWJF. “Now more than ever, 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.”

The study, “Encouraging Trends in Student Access to Competitive Beverages in U.S. Public Elementary Schools, 2006–07 to 2010–11,” presents the most recent data available and is based on surveys of nationally representative samples of U.S. public elementary schools.

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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.

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