bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices for Healthy Youth

Availability of Drinking Water in U.S. Public School Cafeterias

Introduction

Drinking enough water is important for good health and linked with cognitive benefits, but most young people do not meet daily recommendations for water intake. Drinking more water and/or replacing sugary beverages with water also may help reduce obesity and dental problems among children and adolescents. Starting in the 2011-12 school year, schools participating in the federally-funded National School Lunch Program were required to provide students with access to free drinking water during school meals, in the location where meals are served. New research[1] by Bridging the Gap describes how schools are meeting this requirement and provides insight about the cleanliness of drinking fountains.

Key Findings

In 2011-12, 86% of elementary, 87% of middle, and 89% of high school students attended schools that reported meeting the drinking water requirement.

- Most students attended schools that met the drinking requirement through existing drinking fountains.
- Only half of middle and high school students attended schools where the administrator reported that the drinking fountains were *very* clean. Administrators perceived the drinking fountains to be clean or very clean in 93% of middle schools and 91% of high schools.
- About one in four middle school and high school students attended schools where the administrator self-reported at least "a little" concern about the quality of water in the drinking fountains.

How Schools Met Federal Drinking Water Requirements, 2011-12

	Elementary Schools	Middle Schools	High Schools
Fountains only	64.1	61.9	60.6
Dispensers only	13.3	14.9	11.9
Fountains and dispensers	7.5	9.3	16.6
Other combinations	1.4	1.4	0.3
Did not meet requirement	13.6	12.6	10.6

Note: numbers shown are the percentages of students (data are weighted) that attended schools using each strategy.

Conclusions

Providing access to free drinking water in our nation's schools is an important strategy for helping young people to increase their water intake, which may reduce childhood obesity and improve students' thinking and learning abilities. Although most schools report compliance with the new federal drinking water requirement, it is unclear whether the available water sources are meeting the needs of all students during lunchtime, particularly if students need to get up to get water or if cups or recyclable bottles are not available. Concerns about cleanliness and potential water quality problems also are critical issues. Since the federal drinking water requirement is unfunded, schools may need additional resources to address these barriers. Collaboration among district- and school-level staff, including dietitians, food service staff, wellness councils, nurses and teachers is key to improving access to and consumption of good-quality drinking water.

[1] This brief is based on data from: Hood, N.E., Turner, L., Colabianchi, N., Chaloupka, F.J., Johnston, L.D. Availability of drinking water in U.S. public school cafeterias. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. April, 2014. DOI: 10.1016/j.jand.2014.02.001

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Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org and follow us on Twitter: @BTGresearch.

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