

news release

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Unhealthy Foods and Beverages Widely Available and Physical Activity Options Lacking in U.S. Elementary Schools

Comprehensive report examines policies and practices relevant to childhood obesity, including those required by the federal wellness policy mandate

Chicago, June 8, 2010 – Elementary schools across the nation commonly offer their students junk food and soda, serve meals that don't meet current dietary guidelines, and provide little time for physical activity, according to a new report released today by Bridging the Gap and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

In the 2007–08 school year, 62 percent of public elementary school students were able to purchase competitive foods or beverages through school stores, vending machines and à la carte cafeteria lines. Such venues typically offered less-healthy items, including soda, candy, cookies and french fries. But even meals served through the National School Lunch Program often included higher-fat items such as pizza, french fries, and 2% or whole milk.

Researchers also found that only one in five third-grade public school students were offered daily physical education in the 2007–08 school year, and only 18 percent were offered at least 150 minutes of weekly physical education, as recommended by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). Findings were based on surveys of administrators at elementary schools during the 2006–07 and 2007–08 school years and represent about 21 million children in kindergarten through fifth grade each year.

“The majority of elementary students attended a school where practices were not aligned with national recommendations for diet and physical activity, and there wasn't much improvement over the two-year study period,” said lead author Lindsey Turner, Ph.D. of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Bridging the Gap, an RWJF research program. “It was alarming to learn that so many young children had easy access to junk foods and sugary drinks, yet few had adequate time for physical education class and recess.”

The new report, *School Policies and Practices to Improve Health and Prevent Obesity: National Elementary School Survey Results*, examined practices relevant to nutrition, physical activity and obesity prevention. The report details how many schools have not implemented wellness policy provisions required by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. For example, only 49 percent of students who attended a public elementary school with a wellness policy in

place were covered by nutritional guidelines for competitive foods and beverages—even though such guidelines were required by the federal mandate.

The report's release coincides with congressional debate on the Child Nutrition Reauthorization. "These findings are especially critical for informing policies on competitive foods and beverages, which are largely unregulated and linked with excess calorie consumption and obesity among school-age children," Dr. Turner said.

Other key findings from the 2007–08 school year include:

- Only about 20 percent of public elementary school students were in schools that had salad bars or whole grains available through National School Lunch Program meals most or all days of the week.
- About 70 percent of public elementary school students attended a school that had no guidelines regarding the nutritional quality of food or beverages sold as fundraisers.
- About one-third of third-grade public school students did not have at least 20 minutes of recess daily, as recommended by NASPE. Students at predominantly Black and Latino schools were less likely than those at predominantly White schools to have the recommended amount of recess time.
- Only 34 percent of public elementary school students attended a school that annually evaluated all students' physical fitness levels.

The report also highlights opportunities for changing policies and practices to better support healthy eating and physical activity among elementary school students:

- Improve the nutritional quality of school meals by updating the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations to reflect the most current dietary guidelines.
- Increase the federal reimbursement rate for school meals.
- Ensure that all competitive foods and beverages available on campus contribute to a healthy diet. Congress should give USDA the authority to update national nutritional standards for competitive foods and beverages and apply them to the entire campus for the full school day.
- Limit the availability of unhealthy foods in the classroom, including those served at parties and used for student rewards.
- Ensure students have access to high-quality physical education classes for at least 150 minutes weekly.
- Increase other opportunities for physical activity during the school day, such as regular recess, and participation in Safe Routes to School programs.
- Monitor implementation of wellness policies to track progress and evaluate the impact of the federal wellness policy mandate and specific policy provisions.

"From this report, we can see where we need to work harder to help our nation's youngest students eat well and be active in school," said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D., M.B.A., RWJF president and CEO. "These findings are especially relevant for policy-makers now working to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages available to students, whether in the lunch line, snack bar or classroom."

The executive summary is available at www.bridgingthegapresearch.org, and the full report will be released in late summer 2010.

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Bridging the Gap is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded nationally recognized research program 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. In 2006 Bridging the Gap began an ongoing, large-scale study to gather nationally representative data about school district policies and school practices relevant to childhood obesity. This is the second report in the series. In July 2010, BTG will release a report with data from SY 2008–09 that examines the strength of school wellness policies in elementary, middle and high schools. In late 2010, a report that explores implementation of wellness policies and details existing policies and practices in secondary schools will be issued. Visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org.

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