

news release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

For more information, contact:

Chuck Alexander
(301) 280-5705

Landmark Study Reveals Majority of District Wellness Policies Fail to Provide Healthy School Environment for Kids

Most comprehensive report to date examines policies around school meals, competitive foods, physical activity and education, food marketing and implementation requirements

Washington, D.C., July 28, 2009 – While most students nationwide are enrolled in a school district with a wellness policy on the books, these policies are weak, failing to provide our children with the healthy foods and physical activity they need to learn and grow, according to a new report released today by Bridging the Gap and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Researchers found that, in most cases, school districts required strong nutritional guidelines for school meals, but imposed weaker restrictions on what is sold in *à la carte* lines, vending machines and school stores, meaning most kids may have access to junk food and soda throughout the school day. In addition, while more than 30 percent of students were enrolled in a school district that required physical activity outside of physical education, the majority of policies did not require physical activity breaks throughout the day. Further, only 18 percent of elementary-school students were enrolled in a district with a strong policy that required daily recess.

“While the majority of school districts are following the letter of the law, they aren’t necessarily following the spirit of the law, because the majority of these policies lack teeth,” said lead author Dr. Jamie Chriqui of the University of Illinois at Chicago and Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “They’re fragmented, and they don’t include provisions for monitoring, enforcing, or conducting ongoing review and revision of the policy.” Congress included language in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 that required schools districts participating in the National School Lunch Program or other child nutrition programs to adopt and implement a wellness policy by the first day of the 2006-07 school year. The new report, *Local School Wellness Policies: Assessing School District Strategies for Improving Children’s Health: School Years 2006-07 and 2007-08*, is the most comprehensive examination of these wellness policies since they’ve been put in place.

The report uses a nationally representative sample of 579 and 641 districts with policies in place by the first day of the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years, respectively. It provides details about the characteristics of these districts and is organized according to the components and provisions of the wellness policies: nutrition education, school meals, competitive foods and beverages, physical activity and physical education, implementation and evaluation.

"This report is an important reminder that simply having policies in place to help students eat better and move more is not enough. The policies have to be enforced and effective," said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D., M.B.A., RWJF president and CEO. "We can reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, but it's going to take real commitment and action on the part of everyone involved, including the school districts that create our school wellness policies and the schools that are tasked with carrying them out. As Congress and policy-makers at all levels of government work to strengthen these policies and their implementation, we are committed to monitoring progress to improve the school environment for all of our nation's children."

Other Key Findings:

- About 25 percent of students were enrolled in a district with a policy that discouraged or prohibited the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages in schools, even though this provision was not required by the 2004 Child Nutrition and Reauthorization Act (or "the law").
- Across all grade levels, there was great inconsistency in how districts addressed nutrition education in their wellness policies, which was likely because the law required that wellness policies include general goals—but not specific requirements—for nutrition education.
- A number of school districts had a policy that required a specific amount of time for physical activity, but not for physical education. In this way, some district policies actually encouraged schools to fall below the recommendations of the National Association for Sport & Physical Education (NASPE) for time spent in physical education.
- Although not required by the law, many school districts included provisions related to physical education. However, the quality and the strength of the provisions varied. For instance, many policies did not meet evidence-based recommendations for time devoted to moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.
- Only 5 percent to 6 percent of students were enrolled in a district that identified a potential source of funding to support implementation of its wellness policy.

"Fortunately, policy-makers at all levels of government have many opportunities to update standards for all foods and beverages sold throughout the school day, restrict food marketing and advertising, address physical education and provide adequate funding," Chiqui said.

#

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. The report is available online at www.bridgingthegapresearch.org. This is the first in a series of reports from Bridging the Gap that will examine the prevalence and strength of wellness policies for school districts nationwide. Companion reports that will explore the implementation of wellness policies

and provide details about existing policies and practices of primary and secondary schools will be issued later this year.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 35 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. Helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need--the Foundation expects to make a difference in our lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org.