

bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief
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Commercial Supplier Involvement Associated with More Low-Nutrient, Energy-Dense Food Availability and Less Fruit and Vegetable Availability in School Vending Machines

Introduction

By school year (SY) 2014-2015, all U.S. schools participating in federally-reimbursable meal programs must implement new nutrition standards that require removing low-nutrient, energy-dense (LNED) foods, the availability of which has been especially high in school vending machines. Efforts to implement the new nutrition standards for vending machine food items will require most schools and/or districts to work with their commercial suppliers. A better understanding of the influence of commercial involvement with school vending machine food sales could inform strategies to help schools transition to the new nutrition standards.

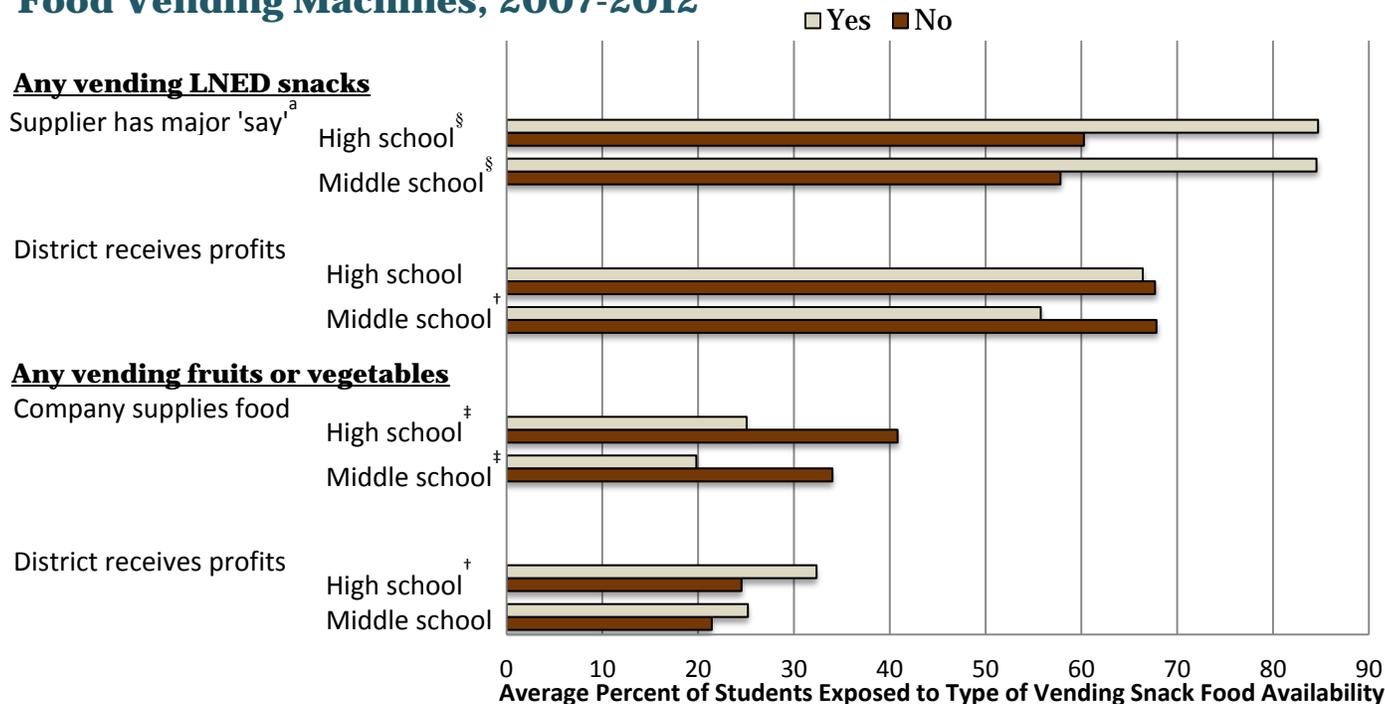
This brief describes observed differences in secondary school vending machine snack food availability based on commercial food supplier involvement. The study utilizes six years of school administrator survey data (2007-2012) collected through the Youth, Education, and Society study, part of the *Bridging the Gap* research program.

Key Findings

One-third of middle and two-thirds of high school students attended schools with food vending availability. In schools with food vending, half of students had at least one type of LNED snack food available through vending machines. Fruits and vegetables were much less likely to be made available through vending machines. Commercial supplier involvement with vending food provision and selection was associated with significantly higher LNED food availability and significantly lower fruit and vegetable availability.

- School profits from vending machine sales were associated with increased LNED food availability.
- School *district* profits from vending machine sales were associated with *decreased* middle school LNED food availability and *increased* high school fruit and vegetable availability.
- Commercial supplier say in vending food item selection was associated with substantially increased LNED food availability and decreased fruit and vegetable availability. Indeed, simply having a company supplier—regardless of whether they had a primary say in item selection—was associated with increased vending machine LNED food availability and decreased vending machine fruit and vegetable availability.

Commercial Supplier Involvement and Vending Snack Food Availability among Students in U.S. Public Secondary Schools with Food Vending Machines, 2007-2012



Notes: LNEED = low-nutrient, energy-dense (LNEED) foods. ^aAmong schools with company suppliers. Availability significantly different between students attending schools where administrators reporting having or not having the specific type of vending involvement: [†]p<.05, [‡]p<.01; [§]p<.001.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

These results support increased district involvement with school vending policies and practices to help ensure compliance, control item selection, advertising and enforceability of contract terms and conditions, etc. The results also indicate that schools and districts should consider limiting the degree of supplier “say” as to what items are actually made available in student-accessed vending machines. Voluntary commercial food supplier agreements to limit sales of unhealthy foods and beverages in schools that were in place prior to the new nutrition standards have had limited effectiveness in part due to limited monitoring and enforcement. The new standards include recordkeeping requirements documenting compliance, but final issues related to who is responsible for recordkeeping, ensuring compliance, and enforcing penalties for non-compliance have not yet been addressed. Caution should be exercised when considering allowing supplier say in decisions related to food selection or compliance confirmation.

Healthy People 2020 objectives call for increases in the proportion of school districts that require fruits or vegetables to be available wherever other food is offered or sold in schools. The new nutrition standards do not include this requirement. Based on the current study, strong supplier say may continue to be associated with decreased fruit and vegetable availability. The USDA nutrition guidelines do not pre-empt more stringent local or state competitive venue nutrition policies; school and district decision-makers should therefore consider requiring that fruits or vegetables be available wherever other food is offered or sold in schools.

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This brief is based on the study “Profits, commercial food supplier involvement, and school vending machine snack food availability: Implications for implementing the new competitive foods rule” available at: [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1746-1561](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1746-1561).

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