

news release

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More than Half of States Have Head Start on Federal ‘Smart Snacks in School’ Nutrition Standards

Princeton, NJ, May 21, 2014 — Sixteen states have laws that fully meet at least one provision of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s updated nutrition standards for school snacks and drinks, according to a new study published in *Childhood Obesity*. An additional 10 states have laws that partially meet one or more provisions; for instance, by matching or surpassing USDA’s standard for elementary school students but not older children.

The study, which was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) through its national research program, Bridging the Gap, is the first to examine how existing state laws align with USDA’s [‘Smart Snacks in School’](#) guidelines. The guidelines go into effect on July 1 and are the first update to national nutrition standards for school snacks and drinks since 1979. The study published online first today found that states are more closely aligned with guidelines for beverages than for snacks: 14 states have laws that fully meet at least one beverage standard and nine states fully meet at least one food standard.

“It’s encouraging to see that some states already have laws in place that will make it easier for them to comply with USDA’s updated standards,” said lead author Jamie Chriqui, PhD, MHS, an investigator at Bridging the Gap. “Many states and school districts where policy efforts have preceded, or even exceeded, USDA’s requirements have successfully transformed their schools to offer healthier snacks and drinks—we can, and should, learn from these leaders.”

The authors compared laws in each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia at the beginning of school year 2012-13 with the majority of [USDA’s standards](#), which included 18 provisions (10 food-related and 8 beverage-related items), to determine if the laws fully, partially or did not meet the standards.

Twenty-six states fully or partially met at least one food or beverage standard. For example:

- **Sixteen states fully met one or more standards:** states met four provisions on average, with a maximum of nine provisions in Massachusetts.
- **Ten states partially met USDA standards for specific beverage and snack provisions:** nine states restricted beverages to only water, 100% juice, and low-fat or nonfat milks, but the state law did not apply to all middle and high school students. Six

states met the fat standards for snacks in elementary and/or middle schools (but not high schools) and/or in certain locations (e.g., à la carte lines but not vending machines).

States were more likely to meet standards for beverages than for snack foods.

- **Fourteen states fully met at least one specific USDA beverage standard:** 11 states met the requirement for 100% juice; nine states met the water requirement; eight states met the low-fat or nonfat milk requirement; eight states met the requirement for restricting caffeine in elementary and middle schools; and four states met the standards for portion sizes.
- **Nine states fully met at least one specific USDA snack standards:** six states met the trans fat limits; five states met the total fat standard and one met the saturated fat limits; five states met the calorie limits; and one state met the sodium limits for snacks.

The authors note that that state departments of education and boards of education also have adopted and implemented nutrition standards for school snacks and drinks that were not codified into state law and, therefore, were not reflected in this study. Additionally, many individual school districts have adopted district-level policies that were beyond the scope of this study.

According to Chriqui, it wasn't surprising that no state law fully complies with all of USDA's standards. Children's health advocates have been pushing for strong federal standards for years because state laws and district policies vary widely. As a result, many U.S. schools have been selling junk foods and sugary drinks, which negatively impacts students' diets and contributes to the nation's childhood obesity epidemic. A [report](#) by Mission Readiness found that students in the United States consume almost 400 billion calories from high-calorie, low-nutrient foods sold at school each year. Other [research](#) shows that restricting sales of unhealthy snacks and beverages in schools improves children's diets and reduces weight gain.

“Our nation's schools have a powerful influence on kids' diets and their health. We need to ensure that all kids—regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or which state they live in—have the opportunity to choose nutritious snacks and drinks throughout the day,” said John Lumpkin, MD, senior vice president at RWJF. “Some states and districts have farther to go, and it's going to take collaboration between industry and schools to help close the gap, but the ultimate goal is too important to ignore. We're working to build a Culture of Health that supports all children maintaining a healthy weight.”

The snack guidelines complement USDA's updated [school meal standards](#) by requiring schools to sell healthier fare in vending machines, cafeteria à la carte lines, stores and other places outside of meal programs. ‘Smart Snacks in School’ standards call for more whole grains; low-fat dairy products; fruits and vegetables; and leaner protein. The standards also set limits on calories, sugar, fat and sodium to discourage sales of sugary drinks, candies and junk foods. Implementation will begin at the start of 2014-15 school year and USDA is offering training and technical assistance materials to help schools comply.

Some schools and districts, including those participating in the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's [Healthy Schools Program](#), have come out in front of USDA's rule with strong policies that promote only healthy snacks and drinks to students. Many are [reporting](#) no decline in overall food service revenues and a positive student response.

About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap (BTG) is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 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. BTG is a joint project of the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org or follow BTG on Twitter at [@BTGresearch](https://twitter.com/BTGresearch).

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