



Building the Argument: Providing Health-Promoting Foods Throughout Our Schools

Given the growing epidemic of obesity in the U.S. and the link between nutrition and academic performance, we must work together to ensure that healthy foods are available throughout the school environment—in school meal programs, a la carte offerings, snack bars, vending machines and fundraising efforts.

Our children are getting fatter. They eat too little of the right foods, too much of the wrong foods.

- Poor diet and inadequate physical activity are the second leading cause of death in the United States and together account for at least 300,000 deaths and \$100 billion in costs annually. Obesity and overweight have “reached epidemic proportions in the United States” [1].
- The epidemic has hit our children particularly hard: “today there are nearly twice as many overweight children and almost three times as many overweight adolescents as there were in 1980” [1].
- Only 2% of school-aged children meet the Food Guide Pyramid serving recommendations for all five major food groups [2]. Approximately only 1 in 5 kids gets “5 a Day” of fruits and vegetables [3].
- Less than a third of school children consume the recommended milk group servings on any given day. Teenagers drink twice as much carbonated soda as milk [4].
- Children’s diets are high in added sugars. For all children, added sugars contribute an average of 20% of total food energy [2]. Nearly half of 8th- and 10th-grade kids eat three or more snacks daily, with most of these snacks high in sugar, sodium, and fat [5].

Government agencies and health and education organizations are working together to call for a wider range of healthy foods throughout our schools.

- The U.S. Surgeon General, the CDC, the USDA, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have all called on schools to provide a variety of health-promoting foods in our nation’s schools [6], [7].
- According , to the National Conference of State Legislatures, two dozen states introduced legislation this year to regulate school vending machines or set new nutrition standards.
- More than 35 national education, health, fitness, and nutrition organizations and government agencies are Action for Healthy Kids collaborating partners and support improved child nutrition and physical activity in schools.

Many school environments reinforce poor eating habits.

- More students are choosing to purchase foods from “competitive” sources such as a la carte and vending, which, unlike the National School Lunch Program, have no federal nutrition guidelines [8].

- Although the federal government bans public schools from selling “foods of minimum nutritional value” in the food service areas during the school meal periods, “regulation of competitive foods in other contexts is left to the states and school districts” [9].
- The amount of milk purchased by school districts fell by nearly 30% from 1985 to 1997. Districts bought 1100% more soft drinks during the same period [10].
- According to the CDC, “43% of elementary, 74% of middle/junior high, and 98% of senior high schools have either a vending machine or a school store, canteen, or snack bar where students can purchase food or beverages” [8].

By supporting healthy eating and expanding access to health-promoting foods and beverages, schools can still meet their revenue goals.

- Innovative programs in many states and school districts demonstrate that kids will make positive choices—when healthful options are tasty, convenient and competitively priced [11], [12], [13], [14], [15].
- Many school districts are transforming their vending machines and a la carte items, offering more health-promoting foods and beverages such as fruit, bagels, string cheese, yogurt, and salad, as well as milk, water and 100% juice drinks. Many schools are now using programmed vending machines so students can’t buy low-nutrient items at meal times or until the end of the school day. School administrators across the country report sustained or increased profits from the switch to health-promoting foods and drinks [16], [17].
- A number of schools, districts, and states are exploring “healthy” fund-raisers, including the sale of non-food items such as candles, sunscreen, wrapping paper, and T-shirts [16].

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To learn more about ways to support child nutrition and physical activity, visit the Action for Healthy Kids website: www.ActionforHealthyKids.org.