

National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity

Update USDA's School Nutrition Standards: Cosponsor the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act (S. 771 and H.R. 1363)

The Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act:

- * Calls on the USDA to update its nutrition standards for school foods sold outside of meals to ensure that they conform to current nutrition science and address pressing threats to child health and nutrition.
- * Applies the new definition to all foods sold outside of federally reimbursed school meals (e.g., in vending machines, a la carte snack lines, and school stores) throughout the school grounds and the school day.

USDA's Nutrition Standards for Foods Sold Outside of School Meals Are Outdated and Allow for the Sale of Many Low-Nutrition Foods in Schools.

Nutrition science has evolved since USDA implemented its nutrition standards in the 1970s. The standards no longer make sense from the standpoint of science, current dietary patterns, or health.

Childhood Obesity Is Skyrocketing. Over the last two decades, rates of obesity have tripled in children and adolescents aged 6 to 19 years.¹ For individuals born in 2000, the chance of developing diabetes (which is often due to obesity) during their lifetime is 39% for females and 33% for males.² It is estimated that a fifth (20%) of the average increase in body mass index in teens between 1994 and 2000 is attributable to increased availability of junk food in schools.³

The School Foods Playing Field is Uneven. School meals must meet detailed nutrition standards set by Congress and USDA in order for a school food service program to receive federal subsidies. The meals typically are balanced and contain recommended amounts of vitamins and minerals.⁴ In contrast, the nutrition standards are outdated for foods sold outside



the meal programs (sometimes referred to as "competitive" foods) in vending machines, cafeteria a la carte, and school stores.

Nutritionally Poor Foods Are Widely Available in Schools. Nationally, 83% of elementary schools, 97% of middle/junior high schools, and 99% of senior high schools sell foods and beverages out of vending machines, school stores, or a la carte in the cafeteria.⁵ The availability of vending machines in schools has increased since the early 1990s. Between 1991 and 2005, the percentage of middle schools with vending machines increased from 42% to 82% and the percentage of high schools with vending machines increased from 76% to 97%.⁴

The most common items sold include candy (which is the most commonly sold item outside meals),⁵ sugary drinks, chips, cookies, and snack cakes.^{4,6,7,8} The sale of those foods can negatively affect children's diets, since many are high in calories, added sugars, and fat and low in nutrients.⁹

Most Schools Have Closed Campuses. Nationally, 94% of elementary schools, 96% of middle/junior high schools, and 73% of high schools have closed campuses.⁶ So even with stronger school nutrition standards, most students will not be able to leave campus to purchase sugary drinks, candy, or other low-nutrition foods.

Updated Standards Would Ensure That Federal Dollars Spent on School Lunch Programs Are Not Undermined and That Nutrition Goals Are Achieved. Since the Truman administration, school meals have been regulated at the federal level. Congress and USDA set detailed standards for school lunches and breakfasts. The federal government invests huge amounts of money – \$10 billion in FY 2007 – in school lunches and breakfasts.¹⁰ Selling low-nutrition food in schools undermines that taxpayer investment.

Changing USDA's School Nutrition Standards Will Cost the Federal Government Nothing, but Not Changing the Current Policy Is Costly. The sale of low-nutrition foods in schools ultimately will result in high costs to federal taxpayers for treating diet-related diseases (such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, and osteoporosis) through the Medicaid and Medicare programs and federal employee health insurance. Those diseases have their roots in childhood.

According to the USDA, healthier diets could prevent at least \$71 billion per year in medical costs, lost productivity, and lost lives.¹¹ U.S. health-care costs due to obesity are \$94 billion a year,¹² half of which (\$47 billion) are paid through Medicare and Medicaid. From 1979 to 1999, annual hospital costs for treating obesity-related diseases in children rose three-fold (from \$35 million to \$127 million).¹³

Healthy Eating Could Have a Positive Effect on Student Achievement. Schools with larger numbers of students who eat healthfully have greater annual gains in reading and language standardized test scores.¹⁴

USDA's School Nutrition Standards Should Support Parents' Efforts to Feed Children a Healthy Diet. Parents entrust schools with the care of their children during the school day, where children spend many of their waking hours and many children eat a substantial portion of their meals/snacks. The sale of low-nutrition foods in schools undermines parents' ability to help their children eat healthfully. Parents should not have to worry that their children will spend their lunch money on low-nutrition foods from vending machines, school stores, and a la carte in the cafeteria, instead of on balanced school meals.

Parents Want Improved School Foods.^{15,16,17} A national poll by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that 90% of parents and teachers support the conversion of school vending machine contents to healthy beverages and foods.¹⁵ Similarly, a 2005 *Wall Street Journal*/Harris Interactive Health-Care poll found that 83% of all adults think that “public schools should do more to limit children’s access to unhealthy foods like snack foods, sugary soft drinks, and fast foods.”¹⁸

“All foods and beverages sold or served to students in school should be healthful and meet an accepted nutritional content standard.”

– The National Academies’
Institute of Medicine,
*Preventing Childhood Obesity:
Health in the Balance*, 2005.

USDA's Nutrition Standards for Foods Sold Outside of Meals Are Outdated. Nutrition science has evolved since USDA implemented its nutrition standards in the 1970s. The standards no longer make sense from the standpoint of science, current dietary patterns, and health. Over the past several decades, over-consumption of calories, saturated fat, trans fat, refined sugars, and sodium have increasingly become problems in children’s diets. Those nutritional concerns are not addressed by USDA’s school nutrition standards, and contribute to obesity, heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and tooth decay.

The only nutritional criteria for school foods sold outside of meals are that “foods of minimal nutritional value” (FMNV) may not be sold in the food service area during meal times. FMNV are foods that provide less than 5% of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI) for eight specified nutrients per serving. Many low-nutrition foods are not considered FMNV, despite their high contents of calories, saturated fat, salt, or added sugars, and thus can be sold anywhere on school campuses at any time during the school day.

USDA's current nutrition standards result in arbitrary limits on the sale of foods in school cafeterias.

Allowed:

Fruitades (*with little juice*)
French fries
Ice cream
Candy bars
Cookies
Chips
Snack cakes
Doughnuts

Not Allowed:

Seltzer water
Caramel corn
Popsicles (*without fruit juice*)
Jelly beans
Chewing gum
Lollipops
Cotton candy
Breath mints

Nutrition standards are important not only in the cafeteria but also throughout the school. During meal periods, the sale of FMNV is prohibited by federal regulations in areas of the school where USDA school meals are sold or eaten. However, FMNV can be sold anywhere else on-campus – including just outside the cafeteria – at any time. When USDA defined FMNV, most foods on campus were sold in the cafeteria. Now, the vast majority of schools also sell food outside the cafeteria. Setting nutrition standards *only* for foods sold in the cafeteria is out of sync with current practices in schools.

Most states and localities leave the development of dietary guidance to federal agencies. The majority of the nation's 14,000 school districts are not equipped to develop science-based nutrition standards for school foods. Nationwide, only 30% of school districts prohibit the sale of junk foods in school vending machines.⁶

In addition, there is no scientific basis for nutrition standards to differ for children in different states, and there should be a minimum protective nutrition standard for food sold in schools nationwide. Two-thirds of states have either no nutrition standards or weak nutrition standards for foods sold outside school meals.¹⁹

USDA's Outdated Nutrition Standards Undermine Nutrition Education in Schools. Many experts agree that nutrition education is essential to addressing childhood obesity and other diet-related diseases. Selling low-nutrition foods in schools contradicts nutrition education and sends children the message that good nutrition is unimportant. The school environment should reinforce classroom nutrition education by modeling and supporting healthy behaviors.

Federal Legislation is Needed to Ensure That America's Children Have Access to Healthy Foods at School. In 2006, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the nation's largest soft drink companies, and several snack food companies announced voluntary guidelines for nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold in schools.

Now is the time to build upon this progress by passing federal legislation that ensures compliance across the country with nutrition guidelines, setting a national standard for the food and drink sold to students. Such legislation is critical to ensure that our nation's children have access to healthy food environments that reflect the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Setting a federal standard also would help to ensure industry compliance.

Strong School Nutrition Standards Improve Children's Diets. School food policies limiting access to high-fat, high-sugar foods are associated with fewer purchases of those items by students.²⁰ After the transition to middle school, when students gain access to school snack bars, students tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables²¹ and drink less milk and more sweetened beverages than they did in elementary school.²² **Since, during the school year, an estimated 35%-50% of children's total calories are consumed at school,²⁰ it is critical that all food and beverages sold in schools make a positive contribution to children's diets and health.**

The National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA) is a coalition of more than 275 organizations that advocates policies to promote healthy eating and physical activity to help reduce the disabilities, premature deaths, and costs caused by diseases and conditions such as heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity.

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