

Policy Brief

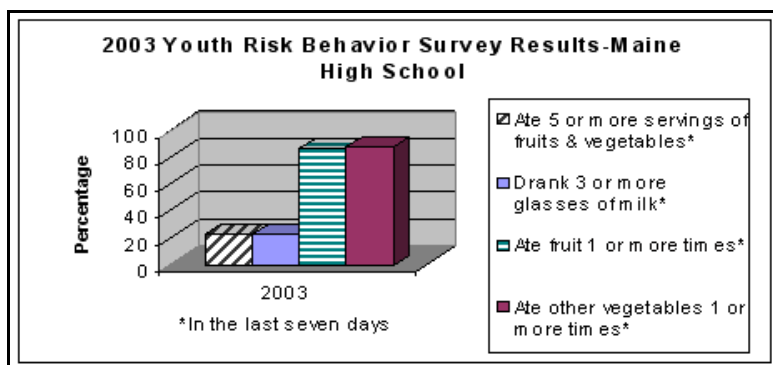
The Competitive Food Market in Maine

Schools can contribute to increasing the overall health and academic performance of Maine youth. An epidemic of overweight and obesity is putting Maine citizens at higher risk for developing chronic diseases. Fifty-nine percent of Maine adults are either overweight or obese (Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2002). Thirteen percent of Maine adolescents are overweight and 15% are at risk for becoming overweight (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 2003). Public schools can provide an environment where youth can acquire skills and receive support in making healthy food and physical activity choices.

What is the Issue?

Today many school districts in Maine are struggling to assure availability of healthy food choices. Many foods are available to students and staff through a number of venues including vending machines and a la carte sales in cafeterias. These foods are often high in calories, total fat, saturated fat, added sugars, cholesterol, and sodium. The revenue from vending machines is often used to support school-related programs, including sports and other extra-curricular activities. Many school meal programs depend on revenue from a la carte sales to remain financially solvent. A number of Maine schools are stocking their vending machines with healthy snack and beverage choices and offering healthier options on a la carte lines as part of policy and environmental change initiatives to support improving nutrition.

Most Maine youth do not meet current recommendations for dietary intake as described in the table below. Seventy-seven percent of Maine high school students do not eat the recommended servings of fruit and vegetables each day and 78% of Maine high school students do not consume the recommended servings of milk each day (Maine Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2003).



Authors

Mary Ann Bennett, MS, RD, LD, Project Specialist
 Judythe Gatchell, MS, RD, LD, Coordinator Child Nutrition Projects
 Chris Sady, MS, RD, LD, Coordinator
 Maine Nutrition Network

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Contact Information

Institute for Public Sector Innovation
 USM Muskie School
 295 Water Street
 Augusta, ME 04330
 (207) 626-5200
www.muskie.usm.maine.edu

What Food Choices Do Maine Schools Provide?

Since a large portion of a child's day is spent in school, providing children with healthy food options throughout the school day can be an important step toward good child nutrition. The United States Department of Agriculture's National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs provide thousands of Maine children with nutritious meals each school day. These programs are administered by the Maine Department of Education.

In the last decade, the nutritional guidelines for these meals were amended to require adherence to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, limiting total and saturated fat and providing specific minimum levels of vitamins and nutrients. Despite these efforts to improve the nutritional quality of meals offered through the school meal programs, other foods not provided through these programs are often available to children at school. These choices are available through a la carte lines in the cafeteria, snack shops, school stores, vending machines, and other venues. The nutritional value of these foods, often referred to as competitive foods, is largely unregulated.¹

Competitive foods include all foods and beverages sold in schools except for meals provided through the School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Current federal regulations restrict only a subset of competitive foods, foods of minimal nutritional value, from being sold during mealtimes in food service areas. Maine rules further restrict their sale during the entire school day anywhere in the school building. Any item sold must meet the 5% rule (5% of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI) for one of eight specified nutrients).

Why Should Healthy Food and Beverage Choices be Supported in Maine Schools?

Chronic Disease Prevention

High blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, and early heart disease have traditionally been associated with adults. Now, however, these diseases and conditions are appearing in children, and all are associated with obesity. In the last twenty years, obesity related hospital costs for youth have increased more than threefold.² Although additional research is needed, food choices have been shown to be a factor in the rising obesity rate among our youth. It has been reported that youth who drink soft drinks consume more total calories per day than those who do not consume soft drinks.³ The children who drink the highest amounts of sweetened beverages also eat more high-fat vegetables such as French fries, and eat almost two-thirds less fruit than those who do not drink sweetened beverages.⁴

¹ U.S. GAO Report 04-673. School Meal Programs, Competitive Foods are Available in Many Schools; Actions Taken to Restrict Them Differ by State and Locality. April 2004.

² National Center for Health Statistics Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Prevalence of overweight among children and adolescents: United States, 1999 [Internet]. [Hyattsville (MD)]: NCHS [cited 2001 Oct 31]. Available from: www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/over99fig1.htm

³ Harnack, L.; Strang, J.; and Story, M. Soft drink consumption among U.S. children and adolescents: Nutritional consequences. *Journal of The American Dietetic Association*. 1999; 99(4): 436-441

⁴ Cullen, K.; et al. Intake of soft drinks, fruit-flavored beverages, and fruits and vegetables by children in grades 4 through 6. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2002; 92(9): 1475-1478

Positive Learning Environment

Vending machines account for a significant proportion of the foods sold in middle and high schools, and students frequently choose foods sold on the a la carte program “By establishing an environment that supports nutritious food choices, schools play a critical role in producing healthy students who are better able to develop and learn.”⁵ All foods offered at school, need to be carefully considered as part of the educational environment.

For information on creating a healthy school nutrition environment see the Healthy School Nutrition Environment Websites section at the end of this document.

Neutral Financial Impact

School districts that agree in principle to support offering healthier food and beverage choices, risk a loss of revenue with a change to healthier options. However, many Maine school districts have successfully changed vending options without a loss of revenue. Below is a sampling of school districts and schools in Maine who have successfully changed vending machine options without financial loss.

- Lisbon High School added milk machines to improve the nutrient intake of students.
- The Old Orchard Beach School District formed a nutrition team including a School Health Coordinator, School Nurse, and Food Service Director, to improve the school nutrition environment. The team succeeded in removing soda, candy, and high fat snacks from vending machines and replacing them with water, juice, milk, and healthy snack options. Students responded favorably to the change.
- Mt. Ararat High School used price differentials (higher prices for less healthy items) to promote the purchase of healthier choices in vending machines. An increase in water sales and a decrease in soft drink sales were observed.

What are the Obstacles To Providing Healthy Food and Beverage Choices in Maine Schools?

- There may be a potential loss of revenue from vending machines for non-food related school programs.
- Some school districts depend on a la carte sales to keep their school lunch programs financially solvent.
- Currently, vendors offer a limited selection of healthy snacks and beverages and this in turn can limit the variety of healthy foods schools can offer their students.

What Initiatives are Happening in Maine to Support Healthy Food Choices in Schools?

Schools are in a position to positively influence children’s food and beverage choices and teach them about good nutrition. Along with a handful of other states, Maine is a leader in developing and implementing initiatives to assure the availability of healthy food in schools. Diverse groups of individuals and organizations are working together to develop initiatives, proposals and position statements to be used as tools both statewide and locally.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Healthy People 2010*. 2nd Ed. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. November 2000

1. Maine Department of Education Proposed Rule Change – All foods and beverages sold in Maine schools must meet or exceed the 5% minimal nutritional value rule for one of eight specified nutrients: protein, vitamins A and C, niacin, riboflavin, thiamin, calcium, and iron. In Maine, this “5% Rule” is in effect during the school day. The proposed rule change is to have this “5% Rule” in effect 24/7. This would eliminate from vending machines all foods and beverages that do not meet the rule.

2. L.D. 471 – Resolve, To Study Obesity and Methods to Decrease the Cost of Health Care and Increase the Public Health – A Commission to Study Public Health was convened in May 2004 and formally adopted 27 recommendations to the 122nd Legislature. The final report was released in January 2005. The recommendations included nutrition standards for school meals and other food and drinks offered on school property.

3. Joint Position of the Maine Dietetic Association and the Maine School Food Service Association – Nutrition Services in Maine Schools – This position paper adopted in 2003, provides the rationale and recommendations for nutrition education and reinforces that education by making healthy food choices available in schools. Specific recommendations for foods and portion limits allowed in schools are included. This is available at www.eatrightmaine.org

4. Action Packet: “Develop Policies that Support Healthy Options in Vending Machines” – The Maine Cardiovascular Health Program in collaboration with the Maine Nutrition Network published an action packet entitled “Develop Policies that Support Healthy Options in Vending Machines” This action packet highlights strategies for increasing physical activity and improving nutrition with a focus on policy and environmental change. The action packet is available at: <http://www.maine-nutrition.org/PANVend.htm>

Schools alone cannot solve the nutritional problems of children. It will take the combined efforts of families, schools, communities, government agencies, health providers, the food industry, and the media to make significant progress.

Healthy School Nutrition Environment Websites

- California School Board Association (CSBA) <http://www.csba.org/PS/hf.htm>
- Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) <http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/>
- Action for Healthy Kids <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/tools/index.htm>
- Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) *School Foods Tool Kit: A Guide to Improving School Foods and Beverages* <http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfood/>
- Team Nutrition <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/index.htm>

This policy brief is the first in a series produced by the Maine Nutrition Network (MNN) at the USM Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, Institute for Public Sector Innovation (IPSI). The MNN is a collaboration of public and private partners that coordinate nutrition activities to create an environment that supports the health of Maine people. The Network’s primary funding source is the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) Food Stamp Program.