

## Issue Brief

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## The School Food Environment

### Background

Schools can have a positive impact on the school food environment by instituting comprehensive nutrition policies. While the United States Department of Agriculture regulates the nutritional content of foods sold in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, foods sold outside the federal programs, called competitive foods, are not significantly regulated in schools.<sup>1</sup> Students can readily obtain competitive foods at school events, school stores, snack bars, fundraisers, vending machines, a la carte lines, and for bag lunches. On average, competitive foods offered at schools usually have a high sugar and fat content.<sup>2,3</sup> The school food environment should reinforce the nutrition education that they are receiving in the classroom. An unhealthy school food environment sends children a conflicting message and suggests that good nutrition is not important for their health.

### Best Practice

Reports suggest that students purchase foods according to cost and their relative availability. Therefore, schools should take this into consideration when developing policies aimed at limiting competitive foods in schools. Research shows that food choice behavior among school children will improve when the following strategies are implemented:

- Replace sugary snacks and soft drinks in vending machines with healthier alternatives
- Limit or eliminate offerings of unhealthy a la carte items in the school cafeteria and increase the availability of healthy food items (e.g. fresh fruit and vegetables)
- Limit or eliminate the sale of unhealthy food items at school stores, school events, and fundraisers
- Institute closed campus policies

### Action Steps

- Assess the current status of the school food environment and recognize strengths and weaknesses
- Collaborate with student groups, PTA, and school administrators to develop nutrition standards for foods sold at school stores, vending machines, school events and fundraisers
- Work with your school food service director to make improvements in the school cafeteria

Additional information is available in the report

**Shaping Youth Behavior: *Impact of School Environments on Physical Activity and Food Choices*** at:

[www.maine-nutrition.org](http://www.maine-nutrition.org)

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## Resources

- Center for Science in the Public Interest's School Foods Toolkit  
<http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfoodkit/>
- California Project Lean Taking the Fizz Out of Soda Contracts: A Guide to Community Action  
<http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/consumer/takingfiz.html>
- Shasta County, California Public Health Department's Creative Financing and Fun Fundraising  
<http://www.co.shasta.ca.us/Departments/PublicHealth/CommunityHealth/projlean/fundraiser1.pdf>
- Center for Science in the Public's Interest's policy page is full of resources designed to help schools improve the school nutrition environment.  
[http://www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/policy\\_options.html#ImproveSchoolFoods](http://www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/policy_options.html#ImproveSchoolFoods)

## References

<sup>1</sup> "Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs, A Report to Congress" Available at: [http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/CompetitiveFoods/report\\_congress.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/CompetitiveFoods/report_congress.htm). Accessed on February 1, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Kann L, Grunbaum JA, McKenna ML, Wechsler H, EdD, Galuska DA. "Competitive Foods and Beverages Available for Purchase in Secondary - Selected Sites" US. MMWR 2005, 54. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5437al.htm> Accessed: February 1, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> French S, Story M, Fulkerson J, Gerlach A. "Food Environment in secondary schools: a la carte, vending machines, and food policies and practices" AM J Pub Health 2003; 93: 1161-1167.