

Making the Healthful Choice the Easy Choice for Students

Junk food, snack food, sometimes foods—regardless of what you call them, students in many schools are faced with a plethora of food choices that challenge their ability to consume a healthful diet. With Congress slated to review and reauthorize the Child Nutrition Act and the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act this year, this may be the time when big changes are made to the school food environment.

CURRENT NUTRITION REQUIREMENTS FOR SCHOOL FOODS

Over the course of 1 week, school meals must provide one third or more of daily nutrient requirements and be consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (1). These regulations are required by Congress and established by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). However, the landscape is much different once you step out of the cafeteria.

There is minimal federal governance over foods sold outside of meal times. The USDA only has authority to establish nutrition standards for foods apart from meals sold in the cafeteria during meal times. Those standards—Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value—were established in 1979 and have not been updated since that date.

Competitive foods were widely available in public schools and commonly consumed by students. In school year 2004-2005, prior to local wellness policies, 40% of children consumed one or more competitive foods on a typical

Foods of Minimal Nutrition Value

Soda water
Water ices
Chewing gum
Certain candies including hard candy, jellies and gums, marshmallow candies, fondant, licorice, spun candy, candy-coated popcorn

Source: Appendix B of 7 CFR Part 210. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/menu/fmnv.htm>.

school day. The most commonly consumed competitive foods were foods and beverages that were low in nutrients and energy-dense (2).

AMERICAN DIETETIC ASSOCIATION'S STANCE

In 2002, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) convened a Competitive Foods Task Force to help articulate guidelines describing the best environment for school-based nutrition education and nutrition services (3). A major recommendation from that task force was that the Secretary of Agriculture be granted the authority to regulate all foods and beverages sold throughout the day on school premises for schools participating in the school breakfast, lunch, and after-school programs (3). The task force also called for the USDA to appoint an advisory committee of experts to develop nutrition standards for all foods and beverages on school campuses in order to promote school food choices that contribute to a healthful eating pattern. Since that time, ADA has been educating Congress, USDA officials, and school and education stakeholders on the importance of federal nutrition guidelines for all foods sold in schools.

There have been small steps forward. In 2004, Congress was not yet ready to give the USDA authority for all foods but they did require local

school wellness policies. The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization of 2004 required local area education agencies to establish nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools—a compromise between ADA's recommendation and those that felt local control in schools should remain the site for these decisions. Development and implementation of the local school wellness policies are varied with approximately one third failing to address one or more of the mandated goal areas (4), but they have driven interest and support for national nutrition standards.

ADA's work did not stop with the 2004 act. ADA members have been actively involved in their local wellness policy committees, affiliates have led the charge for statewide school nutrition standards, and ADA has continued to build support at the national level.

The recommendation for a scientific committee to develop nutrition standards was realized in 2007 when the Institute of Medicine released the report, "Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth." That report recommended that:

- federally-reimbursable school nutrition programs be the main source of nutrition at school;
- opportunities for competitive foods be limited; and
- if competitive foods are available, they consist of nutritious fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk and dairy products, as consistent with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (5).

Reauthorization of child nutrition programs in 2009 provides the right venue and hopefully the right time to pass this provision. Interest in Congress, and a coming together of many education and industry groups to support this issue, hopefully spells success this time around.

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Companion bills in both the House and Senate—titled the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act (HR 1324, S 934)—encompass ADA’s recommendations for establishing nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools. The goal is to have these provisions included in the larger child nutrition reauthorization bill. For this to happen, ADA members will need to educate their representatives and senators about the importance of these bills—why we need national standards and how that will benefit the students in your state and district. That communication can take many forms. And for one ADA member, Karen Ehrens, RD, LRD, North Dakota Dietetic Association Public Policy Chair, who was interviewed for and contributed to this article, it included testifying at a hearing of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee.

COMPELLED TO ACT

Like many ADA members, Ehrens is a member of her local school district health council, a team of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and health professionals who have been working together to write and implement a local wellness policy. Ehrens is also the mother of a fifth grader and member of the school parent teacher organization. “It stuns me that of the 21 children in my daughter’s class, it is estimated that about seven of these kids, or one of three born in the year 2000, will go on to develop type 2 diabetes in their lifetimes (6),” Ehrens says. “I feel compelled to take action because I want to help these kids, and all kids in the United States, beat those odds.”

Not everyone realizes that there has been a subtle shift in our acceptance of what is considered normal when it comes to children, food, and school environments. How is it that we have come to this place in time when we accept that it is normal to provide children access to low nutrition snack foods and sodas throughout the school day? How is it we find it acceptable for adults to raise money in the present and disregard the long-term consequences of our actions—the health of our children?

Wellness Policies Are a Start

With strong team members participating in its development, the Bismarck, ND, Public Schools implemented a strong wellness policy that resulted in the removal of soda pop vending machines from elementary schools in the district; and at other grade levels, students may purchase milk, water, or 100% fruit/vegetable juice during the school day.

Even with the strong policy, the district faces challenges in its implementation. There are still some teachers rewarding classroom behavior or academic progress with candy as a reward. School stores search to find items that fit the policy's nutrition standards. Schools within the district have different snack policies. Some classroom parties and celebrations still include low-nutrient foods and beverages. It takes a committed team and school administration to ensure that written local wellness policies are carried out on a day-to-day and school-to-school basis. If there is not a dedicated nutrition advocate at each school, a policy may only be partially implemented or not implemented at all.

The legislation that put wellness policies in place across the nation was a big step forward in improving the school environment. But local wellness policies, while they have minimum content guidelines, are all different. Some are strong, but others were completed in a very cursory way and sit filed on a shelf. At other schools in North Dakota and across the country, students still have access to soda and other sweetened beverages and low-nutrient foods during the school day.

Parents in small school districts, or in low-income districts, may not have the time, resources, or opportunity to advocate for strong nutrition policies. This can create health disparities between large and small districts or between well-funded districts and those with fewer resources. What this comes down to is that as local wellness policies are carried out, there is unequal access to healthful school environments, and this is why national standards for the sale of competitive foods are needed. All children in the United States should have equal opportunity to healthful school environments.

Taking Action

A flurry of activity to build the case for making changes to the National School Lunch Act has commenced. Ehrens was honored to be asked to represent the ADA and the North Dakota Dietetic Association as part of a panel testifying in the hearing, "Beyond Federal School Meal Programs: Reforming Nutrition for Kids in Schools" on March 31, 2009. "It was exciting to speak about and to hear statements of support from groups across the country such as the National Parent Teacher Association, educators, and even snack and beverage companies speaking in favor of national standards for foods sold outside of meals," Karen says. The National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity is a large group of advocates, including ADA and the North Dakota Dietetic Association, working hard to educate and advocate for changes in the regulations that will happen this year with reauthorization.

Ehrens also found it encouraging to hear support from Senators Harkin of Iowa, Lugar of Illinois, and Klobuchar of Minnesota, who is an especially strong supporter of national standards, having witnessed firsthand the differences in low-nutrient food availability between schools in different parts of the country. "While I was in Washington, I also asked North Dakota's federal representatives to sign on to the legislation, and I am proud that Sen. Kent Conrad is an original cosponsor of S. 934. Sen. Byron Dorgan hosted a Town Hall meeting on Health Care Reform in Bismarck this April and I was able to speak up there and make the connection between health reform and healthy school nutrition environments," says Ehrens. Sen. Dorgan also has signed on to the bill.

Ehrens also provides tips on where to look for advocacy resources: "From preparing for the testimony, presenting it, and following up, ADA staff were helpful and supportive through it all. With great people, written materials, and web resources on the 'Policy and Advocacy' page of the ADA Web site, not to mention each state's public policy coordinator, every ADA member has the tools and assistance needed to feel comfortable in speaking to your elected officials about changing school environments for the better."

LOOKING AHEAD AT NUTRITION STANDARDS

Updating and strengthening nutrition standards for all foods sold in schools is a priority for ADA during reauthorization of the child nutrition programs. Investments in the school meals, nutrition education, and local school wellness policies are unrealized in the current environment. And this relates to the overall health reform efforts—where better to invest in prevention than to help create healthful school nutrition environments for our students. You can make a difference.

References

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