



# Improving School Food Environments Through District-Level Policies:

*Findings from Six California Case Studies*

## Executive Summary

**D**URING THE LAST THREE DECADES THE OBESITY RATE AMONG AMERICA'S CHILDREN HAS RISEN DRAMATICALLY, AND A MAJOR CULPRIT IS POOR NUTRITION.

Unfortunately, the places that should teach our children healthy eating habits and provide them with healthy foods—their schools—are all too frequently doing just the opposite. For example, at more than three-quarters of U.S. high schools, students can purchase sugary drinks from vending machines.<sup>1</sup>

Many schools acknowledge that they give students access to foods and beverages that are unhealthy, but note that revenues from the sales of such items routinely provide critical funds for the school and often are earmarked for popular school activities, such as athletics. Nonetheless, both the foods themselves and the message conveyed by their ready availability in our schools promote unhealthy behaviors and, thus, are barriers to combating childhood obesity.

Fortunately, there is a growing trend to make school environments healthier.

It involves instituting policies that set standards for the nutritional content of foods sold in schools, namely so-called “competitive foods,” items sold outside of the school meal program that frequently include sugary drinks, candy, ice cream, “fast foods” (such as French Fries), and fatty, salty snack items. There is evidence that, when such foods are available, students consume fewer fruits and vegetables and receive more of their daily caloric intake from fat and saturated fat.<sup>2</sup>

During the last few years, legislatures in 42 states have considered bills that would provide guidance for determining types of foods and beverages that should be sold on school campuses. California is at the forefront of the movement. In September 2005, its Legislature passed measures to eliminate highly sweetened beverages and establish standards—which will soon become

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control. School Health Policies and Programs Study; 2000. Accessed <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/shpps/12/5/02>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04673.pdf>



### Six unified school districts participated in the case studies

- San Francisco
- Capistrano
- Eureka City
- Hemet
- Los Angeles
- Oakland

mandatory—for competitive foods sold in all schools, from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Prior to the adoption of the state legislation, several California school districts took action to develop their own detailed policies banning sodas and regulating snack food availability according to nutritional content.

These initiatives can serve as models for schools across the country ready to establish their proper role as advocates for healthy eating. To focus more attention on what schools can do to fight childhood obesity, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The California Endowment asked Samuels & Associates to provide case studies documenting the experience of six California school districts as they developed and implemented policies aimed at reducing the availability of unhealthy foods on campus.

Six unified school districts participated in the case studies: San Francisco, Capistrano, Eureka City, Hemet, Los Angeles and Oakland.

The studies, conducted in 2004, required analysis of the individual policies adopted, site visits to 23 high schools and middle schools to assess their food and beverage environments, and surveys of all involved in the process. Collectively, the results offer new insights into the various strategies schools have pursued to restrict sales of unhealthy foods and

how the experience can inform future efforts elsewhere.

### Separating the Good Food from the Bad Food

In general, the policies adopted in the California districts set standards for foods and beverages available for sale to students at various locations throughout the school day outside of the National School Breakfast and Lunch programs. All policies included a ban on soda sales, but there was considerable variety when it came to other restrictions. Many policies continued to permit sales of sweetened drinks such as fruit flavored drinks and sports drinks. One district banned all beverage sales with the exception of milk, 100 percent juice and bottled water.

Many of the provisions for snack foods prescribed nutritional content and set standards for fat, saturated fat and sugar content. For example, some policies banned snacks in which more than 30 or 35 percent of the calories are derived from fat. Other district policies were less stringent—one district only prohibited candy, and another district's policy did not address food products at all.

### The Policy Process Takes Shape

Each district followed its own path to develop and approve its policy for competitive food sales. Leadership

emerged from various quarters, including parents, students, community health advocates and school board members. In several districts, nutrition advisory committees were formed, and they played a central role in the policy process.

In general, the policies that emerged were enacted because key stakeholders had become convinced that improving nutrition in the schools is central to encouraging better student health and performance. Data, research and media coverage that made the link between student diets and health helped to attract support for the nutrition policies.

## Putting Standards Into Effect and Into the Vending Machines

An analysis of competitive foods and beverages sold at schools in the six case study districts demonstrates the extent to which foods and beverages sold on campus comply with California state standards, which focus mainly on sugar and fat content, and will soon become mandatory.

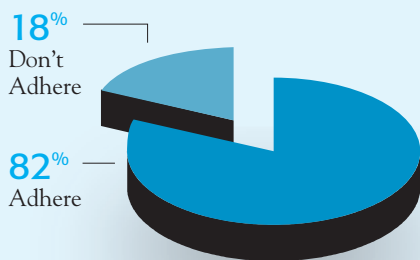
Under California Core Beverage Standards for schools, the following beverages may be sold on campus: fruit drinks with 50 percent or more

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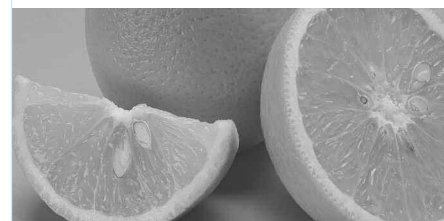
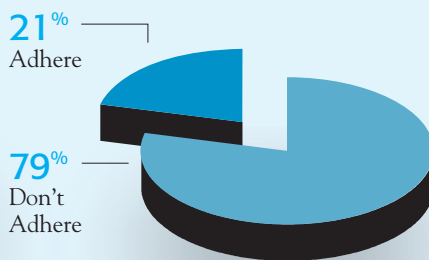
fruit drinks with 50 percent or more fruit juice and no added sweetener; water; milk (including sweetened milks); and sports drinks containing no more than 42 grams of sweetener per 20 ounces.

### CALIFORNIA CORE STANDARDS

**FIGURE 1**  
Beverages adhering to California Core Beverage Standards



**FIGURE 2**  
Foods adhering to California Core Food Standards





According to California Core Food Standards, foods available for sale on campus should have 35 percent or less of their total calories from fat (including no more than 10 percent from saturated fat) and sugar content should not exceed 35 percent of the food's total weight.

fruit juice and no added sweetener; water; milk (including sweetened milks); and sports drinks containing no more than 42 grams of sweetener per 20 ounces. On the case study campuses, 82 percent of the beverages complied with these standards—adherence in middle schools was 71 percent, and in high schools was 84 percent. Sweetened fruit juice drinks accounted for the bulk of the non-adherence, while sports drinks, 100 percent juice drinks and milks were most likely to be in compliance.

According to California Core Food Standards, foods available for sale on campus should have 35 percent or less of their total calories from fat (including no more than 10 percent from saturated fat) and sugar content should not exceed 35 percent of the food's total weight. Overall compliance in the schools studied was lower for the food standards than it was for beverages. Only 21 percent of competitive food items—19 percent for high schools, 36 percent for middle schools—met the state standard. In high-fat or high-sugar food categories, including French fries, candy, cookies and pizza products, more than 90 percent of the foods fell short of what the state considers nutritionally sound.

Foods and beverages sold in the schools were more likely to comply with the policies set by their districts, some of which were less stringent than the state

standards, but there were inconsistencies. Overall, 91 percent of beverages were in compliance with district policy, but at the four districts that set policies for foods, only 61 percent of the competitive foods available in the schools measured up to the district policy. Sales venue appeared to be a key factor in determining compliance—74 percent of competitive foods sold by the school food service met the district standard, but adherence was only 55 percent for vending machine items and 45 percent for school store items.

### Strong Support for Food Policies, Questions Concerning Revenue

In general, the case studies found widespread support among stakeholders for their district's nutrition policy. Most stakeholders acknowledged the role of schools in promoting healthy eating habits and noted a link between diet and better health and behavior. As one supporter remarked, "schools should be a model for healthy behavior." Another observed, "non-availability discourages consumption."

But there also were stakeholders—including those who backed the policy—who expressed reservations.

The most common concern—which came from principals, athletic departments, financial managers and student

organizations—regarded the policy’s financial implications, given that popular beverages and foods targeted for elimination routinely generate revenues for student activities. There was general agreement that new fundraising strategies, such as more creative marketing of healthy foods and beverages, would be needed to deal with the potential decrease in revenue.

At the time of the studies, a number of the district nutrition policies had been in effect for only a short time. However, it’s important to note that there was no documented drop in program funding linked directly to a nutrition policy.

Overall, stakeholders said that none of the reservations about the policy—which also included concerns about its effect on students’ freedom of choice—influenced adoption of the new standards. And while, as one respondent noted, “some of the kids” objected, they eventually “adjusted.”

### Advice for Other School Districts

Surveys of stakeholders sought advice for school districts interested in adopting better nutrition policies. The advice focused on the importance of incorporating strong data and research; building a collaborative process that includes school and community interests; setting clear definitions of acceptable and

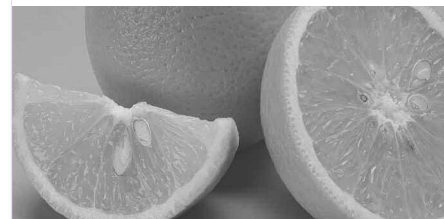
unacceptable foods; communicating to students, staff and parents about why change is needed; and acting preemptively to address potential financial losses.

Additional suggestions included offering schools incentives for implementing the policy and making sure less nutritional beverages and foods are replaced with items that students find both tasty and visually appealing.

Stakeholders also discussed the importance of having a well-defined chain of authority for putting the plan into effect and monitoring its success. At the schools, principals, financial managers, student activity directors and cafeteria managers were viewed as having central roles. At the district level, responsibilities resided with superintendents, food services directors, business offices and nutrition advisory committees.

### Conclusion

Overall, the experience in California shows that support can be rapidly mobilized for policies that lead to a reduction, if not the immediate elimination of, unhealthy foods in the school environment. The case studies also reveal how challenging it can be to change the status quo. The fact that many types of unhealthy foods were still offered in schools





that have targeted their removal is an indication that, even in what are highly motivated districts, unhealthy foods (or junk foods) have strong staying power.

If schools across America are to become leaders in promoting healthy foods, the lesson learned from these pioneering efforts is that reform is possible, but restricting the types of foods available on campus involves major changes and challenges need to be addressed head on. In particular, it is essential to track policy implementation to assure that the targeted foods are actually being eliminated and that healthy and appealing foods are being offered as attractive replacements.

Schools also need assistance with developing alternative methods of fund raising. One reason there is a need for better nutrition policies on school campuses is that too many schools are relying on profits generated by the sale of sugary sodas and high-fat snacks to students. Clearly, many schools in America are woefully underfunded. But this kind of money comes at too high a price.

The good news is that schools do not have to start from scratch. As the California case studies show, a roadmap for achieving better nutrition in schools is taking shape. The main thing needed

now is a culture change in which schools decide that, when it comes to the epidemic of obesity, they will no longer be part of the problem, but will instead become part of the solution.

**Funded by:**

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