

The Extent to Which School District Competitive Food and Beverage Policies Align with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans: Implications for Federal Regulations

Linda M. Schneider, MS; Rebecca M. Schermbeck, MPH, MS, RD; Jamie F. Chriqui, PhD, MHS; Frank J. Chaloupka, PhD

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ABSTRACT

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 authorized the Secretary of the US Department of Agriculture to establish science-based nutrition standards for competitive foods and beverages sold in school that are, at a minimum, aligned with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), while still providing districts with discretion in regulating the competitive food and beverage environment. The objective of this study was to examine the extent to which district competitive food and beverage policies had specific and required limits aligned with 2010 DGA recommendations, and to inform US Department of Agriculture efforts as they develop competitive food and beverage standards. Competitive food and beverage policies were compiled for the 2009-2010 school year from a nationally representative sample of 622 districts. Each policy was double-coded for compliance with selected 2010 DGA recommendations (ie, restrictions on sugars, fats, *trans* fats, and sodium in foods and restrictions on regular soda, other sugar-sweetened beverages, and fat content of milk). Descriptive statistics were computed, clustered to account for the sample design, and weighted to account for districts nationwide. District nutrition policies were strongest for elementary schools. Nationwide, <5% of districts met or exceeded all of the previously mentioned nutrient requirements examined. Fat and sugar content of foods and soda availability were more commonly addressed. Areas that require attention include stronger nutrition standards at the secondary level, limits on *trans* fats, sodium, sugar-sweetened beverages other than soda, and fat content of milk, and greater availability of produce and whole grains at all sale locations.

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THE CHILD NUTRITION AND WIC REAUTHORIZATION Act of 2004¹ required school districts that participate in federal Child Nutrition Programs, including the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, to establish a wellness policy to address childhood obesity by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. Among other things, the wellness policies were required to include nutrition guidelines for foods and beverages sold outside of school meal programs (ie, “competitive” foods and beverages). School districts were responsible for developing the nutrition guidelines for competitive foods and beverages as deemed appropriate. Consequently, there exists great variation across district policies governing competitive foods and beverages.

Recognizing this variation, as well as the growing concerns about the childhood obesity epidemic, Congress passed and the President subsequently signed into law the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010,² which reauthorized the federal child nutrition programs, including the wellness policy requirement. In addition, Section 208 of the Act, authorized for

the first time the Secretary of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to establish science-based nutrition standards for competitive foods and beverages sold in school (while still providing school districts with discretion in regulating the competitive food and beverage environment) that are, at a minimum, aligned with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA).³ The DGA provides science-based recommendations for Americans ages 2 years and older about food choices that promote good health, healthy weight, and reduce disease risk. The DGA is congressionally mandated under the 1990 National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research Act,⁴ and reviewed, updated as necessary, and published every 5 years. The DGA recommends managing body weight by focusing on nutrient-dense foods and beverages (ie, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, seafood), limiting foods and beverages high in fats (including saturated and *trans* fats), added sugars, including sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), and sodium, as well as focusing on the broader environmental and social factors that enable individuals to make healthier choices.

Although there have been several studies examining the content of wellness policies,⁵⁻¹¹ no study has specifically examined the extent to which district competitive food and beverage policies have specific and required limits that already meet DGA recommendations. This study will inform USDA efforts as they seek to develop nationwide competitive food and beverage standards.

METHODS

Competitive food and beverage policies were compiled as part of the annual, nationwide evaluation of written wellness policies conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation–supported Bridging the Gap Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. For the 2009–2010 school year, written policies were collected from a nationally representative sample of 622 districts across 47 of the 48 contiguous states. The districts were sampled by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan to be nationally representative of districts that contained schools at each grade level—elementary, middle, and high schools. The sample was drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data via a probability proportionate to size sampling methodology. The sample was intended to represent districts nationwide on a variety of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics in addition to size and grade level.

For purposes of this study, policies were considered effective as of the first day of the 2009–2010 school year, if they were in effect as of September 8, 2009, the day after Labor Day, which was used as a proxy for the first day of the school year. Hard and electronic copies of all policies were collected via Internet research with telephone and electronic mail follow-up with district officials to confirm complete policy collection between September 2009 and May 2010. Written policies were collected from 98 percent of our sample. Because this study involved the collection of written policy documents already in the public domain (and did not involve surveys of district officials), the study was considered exempt by the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board.

For the purposes of this study, a wellness policy was defined to include the actual district wellness policy; the associated administrative policies, including implementation regulations, rules, procedures, or administrative guidelines; and any district, state, or model policies that were referenced within the wellness policy or administrative documents (eg, foodservice standards, vending regulations).

All policies were 100% double-coded by two trained analysts (and coauthors on the study) using an adaptation of the previously proven valid and reliable wellness policy coding scheme developed by Schwartz and colleagues¹² and originally presented in Chiqui and colleagues.¹⁰ The competitive food and beverage coding scheme was adapted to determine district compliance with the Institute of Medicine's nutrition standards¹³ and differentiation by grade level, because previous work¹⁴⁻¹⁷ indicates that competitive food and beverage policies and practices vary greatly by grade level. Fourteen competitive food and beverage variables were coded separately by location of sale (ie, vending machines, school stores, à la carte), using an ordinal coding scheme (0 through 4). No policy or provision (coded as 0) indicated that the district did not have a given policy provision in place or did not have a wellness policy or any competitive food and beverage poli-

cies. Weak policy provisions (coded as 1) were defined as those that included vague terms, suggestions, recommendations, or were limited to a percentage of items sold. Strong policy provisions (coded as 2 or higher depending on the item) were defined as those that included required and specific limits, met the Institute of Medicine standard for the given item, or required a complete ban on competitive foods and/or beverages or a location ban.

Although the Institute of Medicine standards are considered the "gold standard" for competitive foods and beverages sold in schools, this study sought to provide a baseline assessment for USDA and other decision makers responsible for implementing the provisions of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 as to the extent to which district competitive food and beverage provisions are already aligned with recommendations set forth in the DGA, so that there is a common understanding of where policies might need to be strengthened going forward. A policy was considered to be aligned with selected recommendations of the DGA if the variables for sugar, fat, *trans* fat, and sodium in foods were coded as a ≥ 2 (ie, strong policy with required and specific limits or complete location bans), and fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain availability were coded as 2 (strong policy). For beverages to be considered aligned with DGA recommendations, regular soda availability was coded as ≥ 2 (ie, soda ban) and other SSB availability and fat content of milk were coded as ≥ 3 (ie, prohibit other SSBs and only allow 1% or nonfat milk, respectively, or complete location bans). Each item except the variable for fruits, vegetables, and whole grains was coded independently for each location of sale (ie, vending, school stores, à la carte).

Descriptive statistics were computed with the SVY command in STATA (version 11.2, 2009, StataCorp LP),¹⁸ were clustered to account for the sample design, and the data were weighted to account for districts nationwide.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

School districts nationwide tend to adopt competitive food and beverage policies focused heavily on elementary students, followed by middle, and lastly high school students. Less than 5% of all districts nationwide met or exceeded all of the specific DGA-recommended nutrient requirements (ie, sugars, fats, *trans* fats, and sodium) examined for this study across all locations of sale for the 2009–2010 school year. In addition, only 4% of districts nationwide required fruits, vegetables, and/or whole grains to be sold across competitive food locations. Competitive food and beverage guidelines also tend to focus more heavily on vending machine sales compared to other points of sale. District characteristics, including race/ethnicity, free and reduced-price lunch, district size, and urbanicity did not statistically predict the likelihood of district policies aligning with the DGA.

Table 1 shows the percentages of school districts nationwide with competitive food policy provisions that included specific and required limits on selected nutrients recommended by the DGA by grade level and location of sale. Across all food sale locations, both collectively and individually, fat was the nutrient most commonly addressed. Thirty-six percent, 32%, and 25% of policies applicable at the elementary school, middle school, and high school levels, respectively, required specific limits for fat. Requirements for sugar were

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