

Science-Based Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools

The prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a major report in May 2007 with recommendations for nutrition standards for all foods sold or served at school outside of the federal school meals program. *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth* was developed by the Committee on Nutrition Standards for Foods in School. The committee was composed of 14 prominent nutrition experts and representatives of the education system, including Barbara Fish of the West Virginia Board of Education, who was nominated to the committee by NASBE.

The U.S. Congress commissioned the study in response to rising rates of overweight among the nation's youth. For example, the average weight of a 10-year-old girl in the early 1960s was 77 pounds, but was 88 pounds 40 years later; the average weight of a 10-year-old boy increased from 74 pounds to 85 pounds.¹ Citing research showing that the school environment has a vital role in shaping children's health behaviors, the IOM committee noted that the rise in child overweight has been associated with an increase in the number of alternative food options available on school campuses. In most schools, unhealthful foods and beverages are directly competing with the nutritious breakfasts and lunches offered through federally reimbursable school nutrition programs. What is more, since children spend the majority of their day at school and often stay for after-school activities, the foods and beverages available during and after school can contribute a substantial number of calories to their total daily consumption. Such "competitive foods" can be obtained from school stores and snack bars, vending machines, à la carte service in the school cafeteria, concession stands, and classroom celebrations.

In recent years, several other groups have promoted nutrition standards developed through the give-and-take of negotiation among stakeholders, including guidelines promoted by the beverage industry, a model wellness policy from the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity, and nationwide agree-

ments with the American Beverage Association and major snack food producers announced by former President Clinton in 2006. In contrast, the detailed IOM nutrition standards are rigorously grounded in science and actively promote the federally issued Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Bipartisan bills have been introduced in both houses of Congress to require that USDA implement campus-wide nutrition standards for all schools that participate in the federal school meals program. In advance of (or in the absence of) federal action, state boards of education and state legislatures may wish to consider adopting or phasing in the IOM nutrition standards.

In January 2008, the West Virginia State Board of Education became the first to pass an integrated nutrition policy based on the IOM standards.

Summary of the IOM Nutrition Standards

The IOM committee made three overarching recommendations:

1. Nutritious, federally reimbursable school meal programs should be the main source of food and beverages at school.
2. Opportunities for competitive foods should be limited.
3. If competitive foods are available, they should only consist of nutritious fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk and dairy products.

Highlights of the committee's 13 detailed standards include the following:

★ Beverages are limited to

- plain water (without flavoring, additives, or carbonation), available throughout the school day at no cost;
- nonfat and 1% low-fat milk, including soy milk, with a limited amount of calories from flavoring; and

1. National Center for Education Statistics, *Mean Body Weight, Height, and Body Mass Index, United States, 1960-2002*. Advance Data No. 347 (October 2004). Available online at www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad347.pdf. Average height also increased during this period, but at a lower rate than weight.

- 100% juice in 4 ounce portions for elementary and middle schools and 8 ounce portions for high schools.
- ★ Snack and food items are fruit, vegetable, or whole grain products and are
 - single-serving portions;
 - no more than 200 calories per portion;
 - no more than 35% of calories from fat, no more than 10% of calories from saturated fat, and zero trans fats;
 - no more than 35% of calories from total sugars (with an exception for yogurt); and
 - no more than 200 mg of sodium.
- ★ À la carte entrée items sold by the school food service program meet the above fat and sugar limits and contain no more than 480 mg of sodium.
- ★ Non-caffeinated diet sodas are only allowed in high schools after the end of the school day, and soda machines do not carry commercial advertising.
- ★ Sports drinks are only available at the discretion of coaches for student athletes engaged in vigorous activity lasting an hour or more.
- ★ Foods and beverages are not used as rewards or withheld as punishment.

Issues to Consider

- ★ Many school foodservice programs rely on the sale of popular à la carte entrée items to balance budgets. School meals are an essential academic support service: if child nutrition managers can document negative effects from restrictive nutrition standards, education leaders may need to advocate higher meal reimbursement rates or consider other financial adjustments.
- ★ Many school clubs and organizations have a tradition of selling candy and other foods and drinks for fundraisers. The IOM committee accepted that fundraising is an important activity, but noted that financial goals can be accomplished using healthy foods and non-food products.
- ★ Sugary, high-fat treats to celebrate birthdays and holidays in elementary school classrooms have become a

tradition in many places. In addition to contributing to an unhealthy diet, such foods brought in from home can raise serious food safety and contamination issues.

Games, songs, and physical activities are alternative ways for children to celebrate special occasions.

- ★ The IOM committee recognizes that its recommended standards cannot realistically apply to meals brought from home. Schools can provide nutrition education to students and appropriate guidance to students' families.
- ★ Many athletic, cultural, and community events that take place on school grounds involve adult visitors. The IOM committee recognized that attempting to regulate items sold at such events may be impractical and even undesirable and left the issue to the discretion of state and local decisionmakers.
- ★ Off-campus stores and fast-food restaurants are another major source of unhealthy foods in competition with the school meals program. Education leaders can require or encourage schools to establish closed campus policies wherever feasible.
- ★ School nutrition standards address only one side of the “calories-in/calories-out” energy balance equation. Education leaders need to establish quality physical education programs, provide opportunities for other physical activity throughout the school day, and establish safe routes for walking and biking to school.

Resources

Ordering information for the IOM report *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way toward Healthier Youth*, along with a report brief and fact sheets, is available at www.iom.edu/CMS/3788/30181/42502.aspx.

The staff members of NASBE's Center for Safe and Healthy Schools can provide policy assistance and advice on implementing the IOM report. Contact Healthy Eating Project Director Jim Bogden at (703) 740-4829 or e-mail jimb@nasbe.org.

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