



## SMART SCHOOL FOODS

### IMPLEMENTING THE NEW SMART SNACKS IN SCHOOLS NUTRITION STANDARDS KEY MESSAGES

**UPDATED, STRONG FEDERAL STANDARDS ENSURE ALL FOODS AND BEVERAGES AVAILABLE IN SCHOOLS ARE HEALTHY.**

**Improving school meals is critical but it's only one part of the equation.**

- The updated USDA “Smart Snacks in Schools” standards went into effect this academic year (2014-15). Updated Smart Snack standards complement healthier meal standards that schools began implementing three years ago (school year 2012-13). These two efforts will ensure that students get a consistent message about nutrition across the school campus and throughout the school day - from the classroom to the cafeteria to the hallway vending machine.
- The Smart Snacks standards apply to all foods sold in schools outside of the federally-reimbursed school meal programs. They will help ensure that snacks and beverages sold in schools meet evidence-based nutrition standards, while still giving schools the flexibility to choose from a wide variety of healthy snacks and beverages.
- Competitive foods that must comply with the Smart Snacks standards include those sold in school, during the school day, through vending machines, cafeteria a la carte lines, school stores, snack bars, and fundraisers. These foods have historically been of low nutritional value and high in fat and calories.

*Because many kids consume up to half of their daily calories in school, we must ensure that all available food and beverages in school are healthy.*

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**STRONG NUTRITION STANDARDS SUPPORT STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC POTENTIAL.**

**Students who have healthy food options perform better in school.**

- Research shows that poor diets low in fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, are associated with lower grades among students. Student participation in the USDA School Breakfast Program is associated with higher grades and standardized test scores, lower absenteeism, and better performance on cognitive tasks.<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Research suggests that children who live in food-insecure households and those at risk for food insecurity tend to do less well academically than their food-secure peers and are more

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likely to be tardy or absent. Research also suggests that these children are likely to benefit most from increased participation in school breakfast and lunch programs.<sup>4</sup>

- Anecdotal evidence suggests improvements in children's behavior and education outcomes when the school food environment is improved. Some evidence suggests that promoting healthier options and a positive dining environment can improve learning-related behavior.<sup>5,6</sup>

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### **STRONG NUTRITION STANDARDS ALSO SUPPORT STUDENT HEALTH.** **Students with access to healthy foods are healthier.**

Recent studies show that students who have access to healthy foods are less likely to gain weight, suffer from tooth decay or develop a chronic illness.<sup>7</sup>

- Less than 30 years ago, one in 10 U.S. children were overweight or obese. Today, nearly one third of U.S. children are at risk for preventable diseases like diabetes and heart disease due to being overweight or obese. Many students consume at least one snack food a day at school.<sup>8</sup>
  - Children with disabilities, including physical disabilities, learning disabilities, as well as asthma are more likely to be overweight or obese than children with no disabilities or chronic conditions.<sup>9,10,11</sup> The rate of obesity among disabled youth ages 2-17 is 38% higher than their non-disabled peers.<sup>12</sup>
  - Black and Hispanic youth are disproportionately at risk of obesity and associated long-term chronic health conditions. In 2011-2012, 38.9% of Hispanic and 35.2% of non-Hispanic black children 2-19 years old were obese or overweight, compared with 28.5% of non-Hispanic white and 19.5% of Asian children of the same age range.<sup>13</sup>
  - Disparities also exist across levels of education attainment; children whose adult head of household has completed high school are far less likely to be obese than those whose adult head of household did not complete high school (9% vs. 19% among girls and 11% vs. 22% among boys) between 1999-2010.<sup>14</sup>
- The increase in child weight observed between 1988 and 2002 may have been prevented by an average reduction of only 110-165 calories per day. This is the difference between providing an elementary school student an apple rather than a candy bar.<sup>15</sup>
- Children may consume up to 50 percent of their daily calories at school, so it is critical to support healthy choices during the school day.
- Providing students with healthy foods during school and throughout the school campus helps ensure that students are healthy, focused, and ready to learn in school and in the future.

*Healthy food supports the fundamental mission of schools and helps students achieve their optimal potential.*

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### **SCHOOLS ARE ALREADY MAKING GREAT STRIDES IN IMPLEMENTING SMART SNACKS NUTRITION STANDARDS.**

**Many school districts have already proven that making only healthy options available can work - students are eating and learning to enjoy more nutritious snacks and beverages.**

- Many schools have been making meals healthier - about 90 percent are meeting current standards and are gearing up for phasing in all standards.
- Schools that took the lead and started improving snack options years ago are finding the recent Smart Snacks standards very achievable.
- Schools across the nation are making great progress in serving healthier lunches, breakfasts and snacks.
- Improving school meals is critical but only one part of the equation. Research shows making sure schools only sell nutritious snack foods and beverages can help students maintain a healthy weight.

*Many schools have shown that implementing smart snacks is doable and—when done with student, staff, parent/guardian, and community engagement—is a win-win! We can't afford to reverse the progress or turn back from these important steps to improve children's health.*

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### **PARENTS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT HEALTHY FOOD OPTIONS IN SCHOOLS.**

**Schools and parents need to support one another in teaching kids healthy habits.**

- Parents, educators and community leaders and advocates share responsibility for creating complementary, consistently healthy environments at home, in school, and in the community.
- The vast majority of parents are concerned about children's health (80 percent) and childhood obesity (74 percent).<sup>16</sup>
- Parents want to know that their kids' snack and meal options at school are nutritious and support children's health. Currently, most parents believe that competitive foods and beverages are only somewhat or not at all healthy, including those sold through vending machines, a la carte, and school stores.<sup>17</sup>
- *Most parents favor nutrition standards for all food served in schools.* In a national poll, 72 percent of parents favor nutrition standards for school meals and school snacks.<sup>18</sup>
- The Smart Snacks and healthy meals at school complement parents' efforts to provide healthy options at home, and support consistent messages about healthy eating in school and throughout the community.

*Parents trust that schools will complement and support their efforts to promote healthy habits, and appreciate schools' efforts to create and maintain healthy school food environments.*

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**LOCAL AND STATE POLICYMAKERS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN SUPPORTING SCHOOLS' EFFORTS TO PROMOTE HEALTHY FOOD OPTIONS.**

**Most state and local policymakers are choosing to fully support the Smart Snacks standards, particularly as they relate to fundraisers.**

- Many states are already on track to meet the Smart Snack standards and had their own standards in place (whether through law, regulation or guidance) to improve school snacks and beverages prior to Smart Snacks.<sup>19</sup> In fact, 26 states already had policies in place that fully or partially met one or more of the Smart Snacks provisions prior to July 2014.<sup>20,21</sup>
- State-level decision-making bodies including State legislatures, Boards of Education and Departments of Agriculture have the authority to establish a maximum number of “infrequent, exempt” fundraisers schools may hold each year that do not need to meet Smart Snacks standards.
- There is no federal limit on food fundraisers that meet the Smart Snacks standards.
- The vast majority of states have shown their support for consistent, healthy school food options. To date, the National Association of State Boards of Education reports that at least 32 states are choosing not to allow any exempt fundraisers.<sup>22</sup>

*State and local leaders are critical to advancing strong nutrition standards, supporting schools, and ultimately promoting student health through healthy school food environments.*



Robert Wood Johnson  
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## SMART SCHOOL FOODS

### IMPLEMENTING THE NEW SMART SNACKS IN SCHOOLS NUTRITION STANDARDS FAQs

#### Rationale and Background

***Q: Why is this an important issue for educators, parents, and school communities?***

**A:** All educators and parents want the best for the children in their care. This includes making sure educators and administrators adhere to strong education standards, and ensuring that the school environment promotes a sense of safety, health and wellness. Strong education standards go hand-in-hand with a nurturing, safe and health promoting environment. – including exposing students a variety of healthy food options. Given that many students consume almost 50 percent of their daily calories during the school day, school leaders must ensure that students have access to healthy foods to nourish their minds and fuel their pursuit of excellent educational outcomes.

***Q: Why do we need to regulate competitive foods? Isn't it enough to regulate school meals?***

**A:** While a great step forward, improving school meals only takes us so far. Outside of the school meals programs, many school districts still offer students a wide range of high-fat, low-nutrition foods in vending machines, a la carte lines, and other venues. In fact, most students had limited access during the school day to healthy snack items such as fruits and vegetables, but easy access to candy, cookies and other less healthy items. Given that about half of all elementary school students, nearly 75 percent of middle school students and nearly all of high school students have access to competitive foods, promoting healthier options throughout the campus is a critical component of creating an overall healthy campus.

***Q: Why were the USDA Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards developed? Weren't there already regulations in place for snack foods and beverages outside the school meals?***

**A:** Before the Smart Snacks standards went into effect, the previous nutrition standards for snacks and beverages sold in schools were last updated in 1979- *over 30 years ago*. These old standards did not reflect current nutrition science and guidelines, encompass the plethora of new products, or address the various points of sale throughout the school campus or the school day.

***Q: But snack foods and beverages are just one component of a child's daily intake. How will providing healthier options at school will make a difference?***

**A:** The Smart Snacks standards, when fully implemented, will substantially improve the nutritional quality of snacks sold in schools. *Because many kids consume up to half of their daily calories in school, it's essential that we make sure all food and beverages available in school are generally healthy and nutritious.* And given that about half of all elementary school students, nearly 75 percent of middle school students and nearly all of high school students have access to competitive foods, promoting healthier options in these venues is critical to creating an overall healthy campus.

**Q: *Is there a correlation between unhealthy snacks and school performance?***

**A:** Yes, the majority of studies suggest that providing students with healthy foods at school helps ensure that students are healthy, focused, and ready to learn in school and in the future. Evidence suggests that poor diets low in fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, are associated with lower grades among students.<sup>23,24,25</sup> An analysis of recent research shows that students who have access to healthy foods are less likely to gain weight, suffer from tooth decay, or develop a chronic illness.<sup>26</sup>

**Q: *Why change the nutrition standards when a lack of physical activity is the real problem causing the childhood obesity epidemic?***

**A:** There is no question that physical activity is an important part of the equation when it comes to kids' health. Schools have cut physical education classes, and kids spend too much time sitting around and not enough time getting exercise. And while this is a big problem, it is made even worse when students have easy access to high-calorie, low-nutrition foods and beverages at school. Ensuring that all the food choices at school are healthy choices is one critical piece of solving this complex issue. A recent study published in *Pediatrics* found that children and teens in states with comprehensive, consistent, and strong laws restricting the sale of less-healthy snack foods and beverages in school gained less weight over a three-year period than those living in states without similar policies.<sup>27</sup>

School districts and state policymakers should do more to promote opportunities for students to be active during the school day, while also implementing the Smart Snacks nutrition standards.

### **Potential Financial and Other Impacts on Schools**

**Q: *Can schools afford to make these changes?***

**A:** Yes, schools can afford to move away from raising revenue through the sale of unhealthy foods. In many cases, healthier snack foods and beverages have helped to strengthen schools' financial bottom line. A recent report showed that, over time, total food service revenues either increased or remained level in school districts after their state's adoption of basic nutritional requirements for snack and a la carte foods and beverages.<sup>28</sup>

Part of the reason for the revenue increase is due to more students participating in the school meals program, which has beneficial effects for both students and school food service. Since the majority of schools—90 percent—adopted healthier school meals in compliance with the stronger standards during school year 2012-2013, school meal participation rates have been increasing—in some large school districts by as much as 14 percent. In fact, in the first year after the new school meal nutrition standards went into effect, schools saw a net nationwide increase in school lunch revenue of approximately \$200 million. This increase is attributable to a combination of annual reimbursement rate increases,<sup>i</sup> increased revenue from

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<sup>i</sup> Schools that choose to participate in the federally-funded school meal programs receive cash

paid meals as more students purchase meals (rather than competitive foods), and the additional 6 cents per meal schools receive for meeting the new meal standards.<sup>29</sup>

**Q: Will kids eat healthy foods instead of junk food?**

**A:** Yes! When students are offered healthy foods and beverages, they consume them.<sup>30</sup> Students may need a short adjustment period, but experience shows that they will eat and learn to enjoy the healthier snacks—particularly when they are engaged in the process of selecting those healthier options.

Many examples exist of schools that have made the switch to healthier food and beverage options without significant revenue loss. For example, in Perry County, Alabama,<sup>31</sup> school leaders switched unhealthy beverage options in vending machines for water and 100% fruit juices. As a result, students are drinking more water and sales remain stable.

In Cincinnati, Ohio,<sup>32</sup> school leaders secured a new food vendor for school vending contracts, requiring that the new vendors support their wellness initiatives. With their new vendor's wellness-compliant snacks, they earned an extra \$5,000 a year from the vending machines and a higher overall revenue margin. Students also increased their participation in the school meals program by purchasing 7,000 additional meals.

Many school leaders have proven that *kids will eat and enjoy healthy foods if they are promoted in a positive and engaging way.*

**Q: Aren't schools resisting the updated nutrition standards?**

**A:** Even before the Smart Snacks standards went into effect, thousands of schools across the country including those in Alabama<sup>33</sup>, Kentucky<sup>34</sup>, and Ohio<sup>35</sup>, *had already* been successful in improving the quality of snack foods and drinks, thanks in part to state and local policies put in place before the national standards.

**Q: How can schools promote healthy eating options while maintaining or improving their "bottom line?"**

**A:** Schools and districts can ease the transition to healthier snack food and beverage options by taking some proactive steps. Studies have shown that promoting healthful foods, increasing the availability of these options and lowering the price of foods like fruits, vegetables and low-fat snacks can result in significant increases in sales without a decrease in total revenue.<sup>36</sup>

When schools are transitioning to new, healthy foods, they might consider:

- That offering only healthful foods and beverages may help increase acceptance.
- Involving the students in taste-testing and other food selection activities to maximize their acceptance and support of healthy foods.
- Promoting the healthier options through the use of signage near point of sale, pricing strategies that encourage healthy purchases, and attractive displays for healthy items. Research indicates that displaying healthier items more visibly (i.e. at eye level, under a spotlight, in colorful bowls) can increase sales.<sup>37</sup>

**Q: What about the potential impact of these new standards on fundraising?**

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subsidies and USDA foods from the USDA for each meal they serve. In return, they must serve lunches that meet Federal requirements, and they must offer free or reduced price lunches to eligible children. Reimbursement rates are adjusted each academic year. For the 2014-2015 school year, schools receive \$2.93 for each free school lunch they serve, \$2.53 for each reduced-price lunch, and \$0.28 for each full-price lunch. (SOURCE: USDA, 2014.. "National School Lunch Program." Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/NSLPPFactSheet.pdf>. Accessed 11-24-14.)

A: Many schools, parent-teacher organizations, and student clubs have expressed concerns that if junk food fundraisers are not allowed, they will lose an important source of funding. However, schools and school districts across the country are showing that *healthy fundraisers can be just as lucrative as unhealthy ones*. For example, the After-Prom Committee in one high school in Windsor, Colorado holds a fruit sale every year, and in 2012 sold nearly 12 tons (960 boxes) of fruit, raising almost \$8,000. An elementary school in Marietta Georgia held a “Boosterthon Fun Run & Roll” that raised \$37,000. And one middle school in Long Beach, California held a Teacher Jog-A-Thon that raised \$17,000.<sup>38</sup> Many organizations and school districts offer ideas and resources for holding healthy and non-food fundraisers.<sup>39</sup>

## Potential Impacts on Students

### **Q: How do consistent standards promote equity across the country?**

A: Consistent, science-based nutrition standards help ensure that all students have equal access to healthy snacks at school, regardless of their economic status or where they live. And food and beverage companies want consistency – having one set of standards makes it easier to develop and reformulate products. When Congress was considering directing USDA to develop one set of standards, food and beverage companies supported this change, citing that the existing “patchwork” of standards in states and districts made it very difficult and costly for them to develop products that met all of the different standards.<sup>40</sup>

### **Q: Aren't we forcing students to be hungry during the school day if they only have access to snacks with limited calories? What about athletes who expend more energy?**

A: All kids, even those who may require more calories, need healthy food. It's great to have a lot of options available for kids and it's just common sense that all of those options should be healthy choices.

### **Q: We have heard complaints that because of changes to school lunches, students are hungry. Don't these changes make this situation worse?**

A: Before the updated meal standards took effect, high schools were offering an average of 857 calories to students at lunch. The new limit of 850 calories per meal means most high school students are basically getting the same amount of calories. The main, important difference is that the meals are more nutritious now – while still maintaining an appropriate level of calories.

Of course, highly active students, such as athletes, may need more calories to get through both school and significant after school athletic events than one lunch provided to all students can offer. This is why it's so important to also make sure that schools offer snacks that are nutritious and will help students perform well in the classroom, on the athletic field, or in other active after school activities. Additionally, some schools offer all students unlimited fruits and vegetables with meals.

### **Q: Is it true that students are wasting or throwing away the healthy food they are served?**

A: In general, many have expressed concern about plate waste related to school meals. Plate waste has always been an issue in schools, just as it is an issue in other food service establishments and at home. In fact, a recent USDA study found that over 31 percent of food goes uneaten at the retail and consumer level.<sup>41</sup> School food service administrators can use a variety of strategies to ensure that school menus are visually appealing, taste good, and include foods that are culturally appropriate, acceptable and familiar to students. Students are also more likely to try foods that they have been involved in selecting or growing, such as through taste tests, surveys, farm to school, or other opportunities. Studies also suggest that



implementing recess before lunch in elementary schools decrease the amount of plate waste during lunch.

Competitive foods and beverages are optional purchases and students have shown that they will select healthy options if they are available to them.

***Q: I'm hearing that kids don't have enough time to eat. Is that true?***

**A:** A concern vocalized by many parents and educators is the amount of time that students have to eat lunch (and the time of day in which they are served). This can have a considerable impact on younger students who may need more time to eat foods like whole fruits. Planning for lunch periods can be challenging for schools due to the volume of students that need to be served in the lunchroom, coupled with providing adequate academic time during the school day. Schools and states should look to address ways to best plan meal periods. For example, some studies have shown that holding recess prior to lunch increases students' meal consumption.<sup>42</sup>

**Public Support for Healthy Snacks in Schools**

***Q: Shouldn't decisions about what kids can buy at school be up to local schools and parents, not the federal government?***

**A:** Local education leaders are responsible for deciding exactly what is sold in schools – so long as it meets nutrition guidelines. National standards have long existed to ensure consistency and equity for students across the country for schools participating in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program. Schools choosing to participate in the federal program receive a federal reimbursement for each meal served, in exchange for serving meals that meet nutrition standards.

The Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, which established the federal school lunch program nationwide, was originally enacted in 1946 and has experienced bipartisan support since its inception. Schools have significant flexibility in what they choose to serve in school lunches to meet these standards. The Smart Snacks nutrition standards give schools this same freedom to offer and sell a variety of snacks and beverages that meet the evidence-based set of nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold in schools.

***Q: Shouldn't what kids eat be up to parents – not the government or schools?***

**A:** When parents send their children to school, they trust that their children are in a healthy and safe school environment, which optimize learning and healthy development. As part of this expectation, parents support having healthy foods at school for their children eat. When parents send their kids to school with a dollar or two for a snack, they want to know there will be nutritious options to choose from rather than only unhealthy items high in calories, salt and sugar, which undermine both their health and learning.

Results of a recent poll shows that parents support schools in providing healthier snack and beverage options in schools, with 72 percent of parents favoring nutrition standards for school meals and school snacks. In addition, most parents (69 percent) think foods sold a la carte are only somewhat or not at all healthy; 72 percent think food sold in school stores are somewhat or not healthy; and 81 percent hold these views of snacks and beverages sold in school vending machines. Effective engagement between schools and families can also be helpful. Schools should share with parents the type of foods that are available during the school day, and explain that the school values the health and well-being of their child. This can help parents carry the message at home as well.

**Q: Will students bring junk food from home?**

**A:** There is nothing in the Smart Snacks regulations that will prevent students from bringing junk food to school. However, there is strong parent support for healthy school food standards and parents are concerned about the current offerings – with most thinking that competitive foods sold at schools are unhealthy.<sup>43</sup> School leaders can play a critical role in helping students understand the importance of healthy eating – and snacking – and can ensure that the foods and beverages offered in schools are nutritious and provide students a range of healthy options.

**Q: I've seen some of the items served in vending machines. They don't look very healthy to me.**

**A:** As a result of the Smart Snacks rule, many manufacturers reformulated and adjusted serving sizes of their products to meet the updated nutrition guidelines. For example, some products may be baked instead of fried, use whole grains instead of white flour, or have significantly reduced sugar or sodium content. It is important to look at the nutrition label if there are concerns over the nutrition content of a food sold in school.

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