

Schools serving up better options help reverse obesity

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Credit: American Heart Association and Robert Woods Johnson Foundation

Schools across the country are taking several steps to fight obesity by providing healthier foods, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC's 2012 School Health Policies and Practices Study surveyed more than 800 [school districts](#) in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, finding a significant trend in prohibiting junk foods and some positive steps in getting students more active.

The report was applauded by Voices for Healthy Kids movement, a joint initiative of the American Heart Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that works to ensure schools provide an environment that encourages healthy eating.

"Everyone wants children to grow up healthy," says Jill Birnbaum,

executive director for Voices for Healthy Kids at the American Heart Association. "As schools serve up better options and keep ads for junk food and [sugary drinks](#) out of their schools, kids will be better fueled to learn."

Several [school settings](#) improved at prohibiting junk food , according to the report:

- A la carte offerings at breakfast and lunch improved from 23.1 percent of schools banning [junk food](#) in 2000 to 41.7 percent in 2012.
- Vending machines improved from 4.1 percent to 43.4 percent.
- School stores improved from 3.9 percent to 28.3 percent.
- And in after-school programs improvement went from 7.3 percent to 21.4 percent.

Some districts required (9.6 percent) or recommended (32.3 percent) that schools make fruits or vegetables available to students whenever other food is offered or sold. Additionally, more school districts (26 percent) required the availability of healthy beverages, such as water or low-fat milk, during school events and in their stores.

There is a clear need to continue on the path to making [healthy choices](#) easier for children throughout the school day, Birnbaum said.

The marketing of [unhealthy food](#) to students remains a problem, Birnbaum said. The report found that only 38.3 percent of school districts prohibit advertisements for junk foods or fast food restaurants on school property.

State departments of education play a key role in providing their school districts with model policies and technical assistance. Whereas almost all states and the District of Columbia helped school districts increase

access to free water, only 76.5 percent assisted schools in limiting student access to less nutritious food and beverages.

As for physical activity, many schools have made promising advances, the report found. However, Birnbaum said, there is room for significant improvement.

Most schools require physical education be taught at all grade levels, however very few require the national recommendations of 150 minutes per week for elementary and middle schools and elementary schools and 225 minutes per week for high school students.

Additionally, only 58.9 percent of districts require scheduled recess in elementary schools and a mere 10.8 percent require a break for physical activity in middle schools.

More school districts (61.6 percent) also have formal agreements that allow another organization to use their facilities.

"Sharing recreational spaces allows both children and adults to get the exercise they need to be healthy by providing a place to be active in their community," Birnbaum said. "Research has shown that people who have parks or recreational facilities nearby exercise 38 percent more than those who do not have easy access."

Provided by American Heart Association

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