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Lessons Learned From Evaluations of California's Statewide School Nutrition Standards

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While the Child Nutrition Act of 2004 tightened requirements to limit unhealthy foods in schools, "competitive foods"—such as candy, cookies, chips and soft drinks—offered in vending machines and snack bars are not required to comply with National School Lunch Program nutrition guidelines. State and local policy-makers have begun enacting additional school nutrition standards.

These researchers conducted three studies assessing the impact a 2007 California law that imposed fat, calorie and sugar limits to competitive foods. Data was collected from food and beverage sales, observation, and surveys of students and food service personnel in 99 schools.

Key Findings:

- Compliance was higher for beverage standards than for food. Sodas were nearly eliminated, replaced by sports drinks, juice and water.
- It is harder to categorize foods as nutritionally compliant or not, since some exhibited "mixed compliance," such as chips, frozen desserts and trail mix bars that included lower fat and sugar versions of previously noncompliant foods.
- Sales of à la carte items decreased, somewhat offset by increased meal sales, but not enough to cover higher meal expenses.

While the California legislation was seen as effective in regulating competitive foods, strong policy changes are still needed to ensure that students are provided with genuinely healthy foods in all settings at school.

Grants:

- Capturing the impact of new food and beverage standards in California high schools

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