



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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## New Report Shows School District Wellness Policies Fail to Provide Strong Guidelines

While policies have improved, many guidelines for competitive foods and beverages do not comply with federal mandate or national standards.

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A new study from *Bridging the Gap*, a research program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), shows that school district wellness policies remain weak and often are not aligned with national recommendations for nutrition or physical activity. Guidelines for competitive foods and beverages—those offered outside of school meal programs—are especially lax and many do not comply with requirements of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. Yet the report also finds that districts have improved their wellness policies since the federal mandate took effect, and many policy provisions actually exceed its requirements.

The report, *School District Wellness Policies: Evaluating Progress and Potential for Improving Children's Health Three Years after the Federal Mandate*, examines the latest data on district wellness policies, including provisions for school meal guidelines, physical activity goals and other requirements of the federal mandate. It also compares wellness policy guidelines with the 2007 Institute of Medicine (IOM) nutritional standards for competitive products sold in schools. Those standards, which are more stringent than the guidelines in the Act, call for offering more produce and whole grains; decreasing unhealthy fats, added sugars, salt and calories; and prohibiting sugar-sweetened beverages.

Key findings from the 2008–09 school year include:

- Many districts' guidelines applied to either competitive foods or beverages but not both, or they applied to vending machines and à la carte cafeteria lines, but not to other school locations that sold competitive products.
- No district met all of the IOM standards for competitive products, and guidelines restricting sugar-sweetened beverages and sodium content of snacks were especially weak.

- While not required by the Act, most districts had provisions for physical education (PE). Yet such policies generally were not aligned with evidence-based guidelines for time spent in PE or recommendations for engaging students in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.
- The vast majority of districts did not identify a source of funding to support implementation of wellness policy provisions, and very few had plans for evaluating implementation efforts or reporting on schools' compliance with the district wellness policy.

The study highlights opportunities for changing policies to better support healthy eating and physical activity, such as setting stronger nutritional standards for competitive foods and beverages and ensuring that schools provide high-quality physical education programs. Its conclusions are especially relevant to the federal reauthorization of both the Child Nutrition Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The report provides updated results from the most comprehensive analysis of written wellness policies, published by *Bridging the Gap* in 2009. Findings are based on nationally representative samples of school districts from school years 2006–07, 2007–08 and 2008–09—the years immediately following the required adoption date for these policies.

*Bridging the Gap* also is producing companion reports that explore how U.S. schools are implementing required wellness policy provisions and examine other health-related practices in schools nationwide. These reports are part of a larger effort by RWJF to identify and evaluate policies and environmental factors that affect physical activity levels, dietary patterns and body mass indices among children and adolescents.

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