



Tip Sheet – The School Food Environment

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School lunch meals are not the only food source in schools. There are numerous “food” opportunities throughout the school day. School food policies should address healthy eating issues throughout all school environments.

School breakfast and lunch meals: Although the traditional school breakfasts and lunches follow USDA guidelines, students may have the opportunity to buy a la carte foods or beverages during meal periods. Schools may also operate separate snack bar lines. Nutrition guidelines for foods available outside the USDA school meals, sold as a la carte or in snack bars, should be in wellness policies.

Vending machines: Many schools have vending machines that sell snack foods and beverages. Sometimes these machines are operated by school foodservice, others by the school principals. Healthy items can be stocked in these machines. Districts are able to maintain revenue from vending while still providing food and beverage items that meet nutrition guidelines.

Classroom parties: Frequent classroom parties also provide many opportunities for eating. School wellness policies should address the types of foods permitted for parties, and also the frequency.

Rewards: In the past, foods were often used as rewards, particularly candies and sweets. Many non-food rewards can be used in the classroom. School wellness policies can address food rewards, and provide non-food reward lists for teachers. For example, students can be recognized with stickers, pencils, erasers, pedometers, coupons for extra computer or reading time or gift certificates from local merchants.

Fundraising: Traditional school fundraising often involves candy and other dessert food items. There are many profitable fund raising activities that do not involve food. For example, schools could sponsor read-a-thons, walk-a-thons, and student/staff plays, talent shows, or musical performances. Schools could sell school supplies during the year.

Dr. Cullen is an expert in health promotion and education, specifically student lunch selection and food sales in schools. She currently is evaluating the effect of Texas school food policy changes on food selection in middle schools.

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