

# Understanding Foods At School

Good health begins at home, but must continue at school

All school children eat *at least* one of their three daily meals at school. Schools therefore play an important role in addressing overweight & obesity

The USDA oversees the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). Participating school food services programs are reimbursed both with cash and bulk food commodities.

Participating schools must serve lunches that meet federal nutrition requirements: over the course of each week, meals must limit total fat to  $\leq 30\%$  of calories, saturated fat to  $\leq 10\%$  of calories, and meet 1/3rd of the RDA for protein, iron, calcium, and Vitamins A&C

The USDA prohibits the sale of Foods Of Minimal Nutritional Value (FMNV) *within* the food service area, but only *during* mealtime. However, many schools still sell FMNVs at venues *outside* the cafeteria. Such "foods" include soft drinks, water ices, sport drinks, gum, candy et al.

The USDA permits the sale of Competitive Foods (CF), though such sales are not reimbursed. These foods, sold *a la carte* alongside the federally-approved meal, are *not* bound by the same nutritional guidelines. Such foods include: pizza, french fries, hot dogs, chips, donuts, cookies, jerky, toaster pastries, fried cheese stick et al.

CF's account for 50-70% of all food sales in middle & high schools. Schools are as addicted to the revenue they generate as kids are to eating them.

CF's are generally nutrient-poor, and high in fat, calories, and added sugar.

CF's stigmatize participation in the NSLP & SBP.

Vended foods & beverages are successful in part because of the attractiveness of branded items compared to the school lunches. Shortened lunch periods also encourage the purchase of foods that can be eaten quickly

The USDA report to Congress in 2001 noted that due to budget cuts, school districts "suffer the competing pressures of serving appetizing and nutritious meals to students, and creating revenue to balance their food service budgets"

Funds generated from the sale of CF's and vended junk foods & soft drinks are used to supplement shrinking operating budgets. Many of the items and activities funded by these revenues are valuable additions to students' learning opportunities, which makes the potential loss of such revenue hard for districts to imagine.

One obesity researcher notes that schools have become "7-Elevens with books"

While the sales of CF's and vended junk food & soft drinks often solve the very real need for additional school revenue, the unfortunate result is that schools are selling our kids to corporations, who are buying a captive audience of "consumers in training"

Blaming the schools is being insensitive to the financial & social realities they face. Eroding tax bases and repeated voter rejection of bond measures have left schools under-funded. Today's students come to school with established preferences for fast food, soft drinks, and junk snacks.

Citizens should adequately fund schools, eliminating any incentive schools have to raise funds to support student programs by selling foods & beverages that compromise children's health.

## Did You Know?

Some interesting food trends in schools:

- \* Average time students have to eat once seated: 24 minutes

- \* Schools that serve lunch before 11 a.m.: 26%

- \* Schools that sell foods in competition with NSLP meals: 43% of elementary schools, 74% of middle schools, and 98% of high schools.

- \* Schools that allow students to buy soft drinks or snacks high in fat, sodium, or added sugars during lunch period: 70%

- \* Schools that vend soft drinks also vending 100% fruit juices: 55%; vegetable juices: 13%.