

# Fighting Childhood Obesity *with*

## Healthy School Food Environments



Schools are meant to provide a healthy environment for kids' minds and bodies. As places of education, schools provide a great opportunity to encourage healthy eating both inside and outside of the school environment. Not only do children spend many hours at school, but they eat a large portion of their meals there. Schools are also an important source of food via school meal programs, particularly for low-income children. However, providing and promoting unhealthy foods within and around schools contributes to poor nutrition and childhood obesity.<sup>1</sup> Implementing strong school food policies that **restrict access to unhealthy foods, protect kids from food industry marketing, and emphasize the nutritional standards schoolchildren need to grow, develop, and succeed** will create an environment that leads to healthier food choices for kids at school and beyond the school grounds.<sup>2-5</sup>

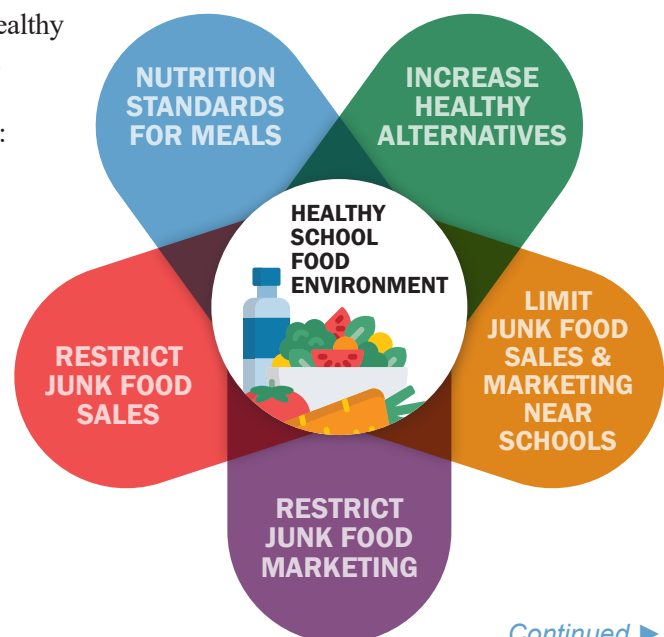
### FACTS: OBESITY AND AN UNHEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

- ▶ Obesity increases risks for depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, peer bullying, eating disorders, and poor school performance.<sup>6-13</sup> Obesity in childhood often follows kids into adolescence and adulthood,<sup>14-18</sup> meaning their future is more likely to include diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.<sup>1,19</sup>
- ▶ Globally, obesity and overweight affect over 220 million children between the ages of 5 and 18; in 10 years, that's projected to rise to nearly 270 million.<sup>20,21</sup> In addition to contributing to disease, the per capita lifetime costs of obesity have been found to equal as much as 3-4 years of annual income, with almost 90% of that due to obesity-related illness's impact on work and productivity in higher-income countries.<sup>22</sup>
- ▶ Unhealthy school food environments prevent kids from making good eating decisions and learning healthy food habits.<sup>4</sup> Easy access to unhealthy foods in and around schools, along with aggressive marketing for those foods, correlates with students consuming more of those unhealthy foods.<sup>23,24</sup>
- ▶ This, in turn, is associated with higher weight and lower-quality diets, especially among economically disadvantaged kids.<sup>23-25</sup>
- ▶ Poorer diet has also been associated with lower academic performance.<sup>26-29</sup>

### BLUEPRINT FOR A HEALTHY SCHOOL FOOD ENVIRONMENT

School food environments are poorly regulated in most countries, unfortunately, leaving kids exposed to unhealthy foods and marketing and at greater risk for childhood obesity. Healthy school food environments need strong, effective policies; components should include:

1. high standards for school meal programs;
2. restrictions on selling junk food and sugary drinks in schools;
3. restrictions on marketing these products on school grounds;
4. limits on sales and marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks near schools;
5. and increasing access to healthy alternatives.



# Blueprint *for a* Healthy School Food Environment



## 1 High standards for school meal programs

Effective school meal programs should limit unhealthy foods while promoting inclusion of nutritious foods. Evidence-based standards for healthy school meals can improve children's diet within and outside of schools.<sup>30</sup>

- ▶ A recent meta-analysis of 91 studies examining the impact of different school food environment policies around the world found that setting standards for healthier school meals increases fruit intake while reducing fat and sodium consumption across children's entire diet — not just the foods consumed at schools.<sup>30</sup>

## 2 Restrict the sale of junk food and sugary drinks in schools

Vendor food standards should mirror school meal standards to prevent sales of unhealthy products in schools. Such standards have been shown to decrease consumption of sugary drinks and unhealthy snacks in school and beyond.<sup>30</sup>

- ▶ A districtwide policy that banned all sugary drink sales in Boston, Massachusetts public schools led to a significant reduction in students' total consumption of sugary drinks,<sup>31</sup> and the state's 2012 implementation of nutrition standards for competitive foods and drinks sold in schools statewide has also been associated with significant decreases in students' sugar consumption, both during and after school.<sup>32</sup>
- ▶ Seven years after Brazil implemented its first municipal law regulating sales of unhealthy foods in schools, nearly 70% of school vendors stopped selling fried snacks, sodas, ultra-processed popcorn, candies, lollipops, chewing gum, and packaged snacks.<sup>33</sup>

## 3 Restrictions on marketing for unhealthy foods on school grounds

Heavy promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages on school grounds through direct advertising, branding and sponsorship of events, and contractual vending and food service agreements reinforces unhealthy choices and undermines messages to students about healthy eating.<sup>34-36</sup> More importantly, it encourages a future generation of loyal consumers to prefer unhealthy food and beverage brands.<sup>37,38</sup>

- ▶ Restrictions on marketing and promoting products that do not meet nutrition standards are possible. Chile, Poland, Spain, Uruguay and certain municipalities in Brazil have successfully implemented restrictions on marketing and promotion of products that do not meet nutrition standards for pre-schools and primary and secondary schools.<sup>33,39</sup>

## 4 Limits on sales and marketing of unhealthy foods and drinks near schools

Effective school meal programs should limit unhealthy foods while promoting inclusion of nutritious foods. Evidence-based standards for healthy school meals can improve children's diet within and outside of schools.<sup>30</sup>

- ▶ A longitudinal study in Baltimore, Maryland, found that having greater healthy food availability within 100-meters of schools reduced BMI gain over one year among elementary students.<sup>44</sup>
- ▶ In Finland, students with low socioeconomic status were 61% more likely to have irregular eating habits if they had grocery stores or fast food outlets within 100 meters of their school. They were also 25% more likely to be overweight.<sup>25</sup>
- ▶ A survey of food vendors within 100 meters of elementary schools in Mexico found that children attending schools with the highest concentration of mobile food vendors had higher BMIs.<sup>23</sup>

## 5 Access to healthy alternatives

Ensuring that more nutritious foods are available on or near school grounds keeps kids' diets healthy while sending them clear, consistent messages about healthy eating. In addition, providing access to safe and fresh drinking water reduces consumption of sugary drinks while increasing water consumption, creating health and other benefits for kids. Unfortunately, many schools in low- and middle-income countries lack fresh drinking water in schools.<sup>45,46</sup>

- ▶ A study of over 1 million students in New York City showed that the installation of "water jets" in school cafeterias to improve access to clean drinking water was associated with a significant reduction in students' BMI and their likelihood of being overweight.<sup>47</sup>
- ▶ In Mexico, many schools lack access to free, potable drinking water. Combined with widespread availability of sugary drinks in and around schools, this is thought to contribute to greater intake of sweetened beverages among students.<sup>48</sup>

# The Industry Playbook *for* School Nutrition

Manufacturers deflect attention away from the downsides of their products through a number of strategies:

- **Reformulation & Look-alikes.** Manufacturers may reformulate versions of their products to meet school nutrition standards and continue selling them in schools. Meanwhile, they often undermine those restrictions by selling look-alike products in outside stores that don't comply with school standards. This can confuse students and parents into thinking that store versions are as healthy as the reformulated school versions.<sup>49</sup>
- **Self-regulation.** Manufacturers will “self-regulate” by making voluntary pledges not to sell or market unhealthy products in schools. However, evidence shows that such pledges don't improve school food policies or environments as effectively as strictly enforced, policies and regulations that are mandatory for all companies, without loopholes that are often written into industry pledges.<sup>50-56</sup>
- **Education is enough.** Manufacturers will argue against restrictions on selling and marketing unhealthy foods in schools in favor of simply educating students on healthier choices. While education campaigns may be helpful, they do not attain the reach of population-based policies and are easily undermined by an unhealthy school food environment. Such campaigns should be a complement to school food policies, not an argument against putting such policies in place.
- **Subsidized programs and activities.** Manufacturers will invest in school health programs and sports teams under the guise of corporate social responsibility, positioning themselves as champions of healthier lifestyles. Meanwhile, these programs provide built-in marketing opportunities, cultivating brand loyalty and a base of young consumers for their products while providing cover against the need for strong school food policies.

IN STORES



IN SCHOOLS



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