

# **Addressing Healthy Eating in Schools: Recent GAO Work on Nutrition Education, School Meals, and Competitive Foods**

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Annual National Conference  
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# Overview

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- GAO Background
  - Nutrition Education
  - School Meals
  - Competitive Foods
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# GAO Background

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- GAO is one of three Congressional agencies.
    - GAO is nonpartisan.
    - GAO is often referred to as “the investigative arm of Congress.”
    - Our reports examine how taxpayer dollars are spent.
    - Our work is requested by Members of Congress, and we are often asked to review and analyze how federally-funded programs are working.
    - Through our work, GAO advises Congress and federal agencies on ways to make government work better.
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# Background on GAO's Work on Healthy Eating in Schools

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- Child obesity rates are increasing and poor child nutrition continues to be a concern.
    - For example, studies have shown that many young people eat too much fat and too few daily servings of fruits and vegetables.
  - The U.S. Surgeon General and others have identified schools as a key setting for addressing child nutrition.
  - In response to these issues, and because of federal support for school nutrition programs, GAO has developed a body of work for the Congress on:
    - Nutrition education
    - School meals
    - Competitive foods
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# Nutrition Education: Overview

- We reviewed federal programs with nutrition education efforts:
  - Foods Stamps Program
  - Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)
  - Team Nutrition, for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)
  - Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)

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## Nutrition Education: Overview

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- Based on what is known about the key components of successful nutrition education efforts, we found these programs were taking the right steps.
  - However, coordination across the five programs was limited.
  - Challenges in providing coordinated and successful nutrition education included limited funding, limited time for nutrition education, and administrative differences between programs.
  - Overall, it is not clear whether these programs are working, because the programs currently do not collect the necessary data or conduct regular evaluations.
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## Nutrition Education: Team Nutrition

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- NSLP has no legislative requirement to provide nutrition education and no funding specifically to support nutrition education.
  - However, USDA established Team Nutrition in 1995 to promote nutrition education through NSLP and CACFP.
    - Team Nutrition has received funding of about \$10 million per year in recent fiscal years to provide grants to states and to develop and disseminate technical assistance materials.
    - Team Nutrition materials generally use simple graphics to present complex messages on healthy eating, physical activity, and a healthy nutrition environment.
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## Nutrition Education: Team Nutrition

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- However, there is little assurance that Team Nutrition materials systematically reach school staff at the local level.
  - In addition, neither Team Nutrition nor NSLP funds the staff and other resources needed to use the materials once they arrive at schools.
  - Instead, Team Nutrition materials may be used by school food service personnel and teachers, both of whom have substantial other responsibilities.
  - As a result, nutrition education efforts can depend on the leadership of a few individuals and may be jeopardized if those leaders leave.
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## Nutrition Education: Team Nutrition

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Efforts to address Team Nutrition challenges by coordinating and sharing information in order to make the best use of available resources have included:

- Team Nutrition staff have attended state meetings of food service staff and have offered to provide local training and resources to help incorporate nutrition education into daily work activities.
  - As you know, the National Food Service Management Institute provides information and support for school food service staff.
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## Nutrition Education: Other School Efforts

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- In addition, many schools and SFAs have developed creative ways to educate students in the cafeteria.
    - For example, food service staff may post information about the USDA dietary guidelines, the nutrient content of foods served, or recipes for healthy foods.
  - And some schools provide nutrition education in the classroom:
    - For example, teachers may incorporate nutrition lessons into units on science, health, or physical education.
    - However, teachers may not feel they can make time for nutrition education, given the demands to prepare students for subjects included in the state academic standards tests.
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# School Meals: Overview

- GAO gathered information on school meals from studies, school visits, and interviews with officials and experts.
- Schools have made significant progress in meeting USDA nutrition requirements:
  - The average school lunch exceeded the required amount of nutrients, such as protein, vitamins A and C, and calcium, as of 1991-92 and 1998-99.
  - Schools nationwide have reduced the average proportion of calories from fat in lunches from 38 to 34 percent.
- But challenges remain: More than three-quarters of schools have not yet achieved the required rate of no more than 30 percent average proportion of calories from fat in lunches.

## School Meals: Barriers

- Many school and SFA officials cited financial concerns as barriers to improving the nutritional quality of lunches.
  - Specifically, when you introduce healthier foods, you take the risk that students will not like the menu changes and will buy fewer school lunches.
  - Decreases in meals purchased can prevent school food services from breaking even.
  - In one study based on information from six states, GAO found a small but growing gap between food service revenue and expenses.
  - Food services facing budget shortfalls sometimes cut staff hours, avoided equipment purchases, or reduced offerings of labor-intensive food.

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# School Meals: Overcoming Barriers

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- Schools have taken a range of steps to improve nutritional quality and encourage healthy eating while minimizing the risk that students would reject healthier choices. Some schools:
    - Developed healthier recipes for popular foods
    - Conducted student taste tests
    - Made cafeterias more attractive by changing layout and décor
    - Made healthy foods more appealing by changing packaging
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# School Meals: Overcoming Barriers

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Encouraging healthy eating requires support from outside of schools:

- Acknowledging that encouraging healthy eating is a shared responsibility, some schools worked with parents, community organizations, and businesses to sponsor health fairs and nutrition-related family activities.
  - Efforts to overcome barriers and make change required strong leadership at the local level, and state-level leadership was also valuable.
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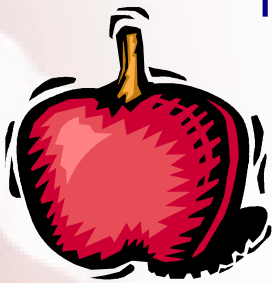
# Competitive Foods in Schools

- GAO has done two reports addressing competitive foods, often defined as those items served through a la carte lines, vending machines, school stores, and fundraisers in schools.
- Issues addressed:
  - Availability
  - Federal and state restrictions
  - Local efforts to restrict less healthy competitive foods
  - Revenues generated

# Competitive Food Availability

## A la carte

- According to previously released national data, many schools offer food or beverages for sale through a la carte lines in cafeterias.
  - Over 80% of all schools offered foods other than milk a la carte.
- Further, many of the foods and beverages most commonly provided through a la carte lines were healthy foods.
  - For example, fruits and vegetables and 100% juices were offered by over half of elementary and middle schools and over three-fourths of high schools in 2000.



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# Competitive Food Availability (cont'd)

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## Vending Machines

- In addition to a la carte sales, national data has shown that schools, particularly high schools, often also sell competitive foods through vending machines.
  - Specifically, almost all high schools had one or more vending machines. In contrast, approximately one-fourth of elementary schools had one or more vending machines.

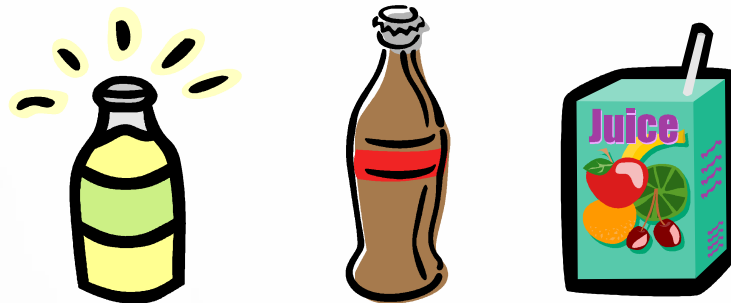
## School Stores

- Further, some schools also sold competitive foods through school stores, canteens, or snack bars, ranging from approximately one fourth of elementary schools to over half of high schools.

## Competitive Food Availability (cont'd)

### Vending Machines and School Stores

- In addition, many of the foods and beverages commonly provided through vending machines and school stores were less healthy foods.
  - For example, soft drinks, sports drinks, or fruit drinks (not 100% juice) were available in over half of elementary schools and over three-fourths of middle and high schools.



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# Federal and State Restrictions

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## Federal

- USDA regulations for the federal school meal programs prohibit the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNV), a sub-set of competitive foods, in the cafeteria and other food service areas during school meal periods.
  - All other competitive food sales are unregulated by the federal government.
  - According to USDA officials, though the agency cannot regulate competitive foods beyond the scope of its authority, it has tried to influence school policy on competitive foods by providing information on how to create a healthy school nutrition environment.
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# Federal and State Restrictions (cont'd)

## State

- In recent years, some states have made efforts to further restrict competitive foods in schools through state legislation.



Source: GAO

Data as of March 2004. See GAO-04-673 for more information.

# Federal and State Restrictions (cont'd)

## State

- Two of the states listed passed legislation that addressed competitive foods broadly, while the remaining 21 states enacted legislation that restricts the times and types of competitive foods available in schools.
- These 21 policies differ in type and extent of restrictions.

	All competitive foods	FMNV	Other group
Entire school Day	0	1	4
School meal period	5	6	3
Times vary by type of school	1	0	1

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## Local Efforts to Restrict Competitive Foods

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- Local school district officials, SFAs, and school administrators have also taken steps to restrict the availability of competitive foods in recent years.
    - For example, as of April 2004, more than half of the 10 largest U.S. school districts had policies that restricted competitive foods beyond federal and state regulations.
    - Local policies and practices to restrict competitive foods vary widely in their scope, but they often focus on replacing less healthy foods with more nutritious options.
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## Local Efforts to Restrict Competitive Foods (cont'd)

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- Recognizing that improving child nutrition is important, and that local communities may be in the best position to decide how to do this, the Congress included the wellness policy provision in the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act.
    - This provision provides communities the flexibility to decide how best to address these issues in their own schools.
    - The provision also presents an opportunity for districts to discuss and address these issues with many different groups in their communities.
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# Revenues Generated by Competitive Foods Sales

- At this time, it is unclear how much revenue is generated by competitive food sales across the country.
  - While some of the revenues are generated by SFAs, often through a la carte sales, other revenues are generated by groups such as school administrators, student clubs, and parent groups, through fundraisers, exclusive beverage contracts, and other sales.
  - A limited number of studies have provided information on competitive food revenues in one or more districts or schools, and media articles have also reported some information, but national level information has been unavailable.
- Our new report, GAO-05-563, coming in September, will provide national-level information on revenues generated by competitive food sales.



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## Final Thoughts

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- Schools are well positioned to positively influence what children eat and what they know about good nutrition, and there is growing support for actions to provide children with healthy choices in school.
  - In addition, parents and communities are also important to improving child nutrition and overall health by providing nutrition information, healthy food choices, and models of healthy behavior.
  - Coordinated efforts involving schools, parents, and communities will likely be the most effective way to improve child nutrition and health.
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## Related GAO Products

(Available at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov))

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GAO-05-563. *(2<sup>nd</sup> Competitive Foods Report)* Coming in September 2005.

GAO-04-528. *Nutrition Education: USDA Provides Services through Multiple Programs, but Stronger Linkages among Efforts Are Needed.* April 27, 2004.

GAO-04-673. *School Meal Programs: Competitive Foods Are Available in Many Schools; Actions Taken to Restrict Them Differ by State and Locality.* April 23, 2004.

GAO-03-506. *School Lunch Program: Efforts Needed to Improve Nutrition and Encourage Healthy Eating.* May 9, 2003.

GAO-03-569. *School Meal Programs: Revenue and Expense Information from Selected States.* May 9, 2003.

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