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*Nutrition for Health*



## SNACK BAR / A LA CARTE FOODS IN SCHOOLS

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MINUTE  
PAPER

Foods sold in snack bars or a la carte lines in schools are often called competitive foods, because they "compete" with the National School Lunch or School Breakfast Programs. Students have access to competitive foods in snack bars, vending machines, or school stores in a high percentage of schools.

The USDA has limited regulatory authority over these foods. Only sales of foods of minimal nutritional value (FMNVs) are restricted in food service areas, but may be sold anywhere else in the school at any time. FMNVs are defined as foods providing less than 5% of recommended intakes for eight key nutrients; examples include carbonated soda, gum, hard candies and jelly beans. Other popular competitive foods like sugar-sweetened beverages, candy bars, chips and ice cream, are not considered FMNVs and may be sold in the cafeteria during meal periods.

Unfortunately, sales of competitive foods can lead to reduced school meal participation so that fewer children eat school meals that meet nutrition standards, and schools receive less revenue and commodity support. When students eat these foods at lunch, healthy foods are often ignored.

Guidelines for competitive foods should be enacted as part of the school wellness policy. For example, policies for foods available on snack bar or a la carte lines could be set. The Institute of Medicine recommends limiting competitive foods, if available, to primarily fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products. One or two favorite main dish items could be available. Students could then be encouraged to take the components of a reimbursable meal, while still being able to "choose" items from the snack bar. This maintains revenue from reimbursable meals.

School wellness councils should work with school foodservice directors to develop menus that appeal to students and increase participation, thus reducing the negative attitude toward school foods.

*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.*

### References

Texas Public School Nutrition Policy.

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