

Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research
Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

ISSUE BRIEF

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Healthier School Snacks & Latino Kids

Introduction

Children and adolescents consume a high proportion of their daily calories at school, which means it is important to consider the types of foods and drinks available in schools, along with the impact those items can have on students' diets and weight.

Latino students are widely exposed to snacks and drinks sold in school à la carte lines, vending machines, stores, snack bars, and other venues. These items are sometimes called competitive foods because they are sold in competition with the reimbursable school meal. These snacks and drinks are often high in fat, calories, sugar and/or salt, and offer little nutritional value.

Access to snack foods and beverages in schools has a disproportionately negative health influence among Latino students, and schools with a higher proportion of Latino students tend to have weaker policies regarding access to these items.

Latinos are projected to comprise 35 percent of the U.S. youth population by 2050. Implementing and enforcing stronger nutrition standards for snacks and drinks sold in school can help ensure students have healthier choices at school and may help this growing population maintain a healthy weight.

The Evidence

Latino students have greater access to the venues that sell snacks.

- In 2010, Latino middle-school students across the nation had significantly greater access to school stores or snack bars/carts than White or black students.
- Latino high-school students had greater access to brand-name fast food in schools than did their black or White peers in 2005.

Latino students are more likely to buy and eat snacks in school, when available.

- Latino students were at least twice as likely as White students to buy from a vending machine, when available, according to multiple studies.
- A 2011 study found that a majority-Latino student population in California consumed more unhealthy foods at school and also bought and consumed unhealthy items if available, independent of school lunch program participation.

Latino-centric schools tend to have weaker policies regarding school snacks and drinks, and may be less likely to implement nutritional guidelines for them consumption is increasing.

- States with a relatively high proportion of Latino students were more likely to have weak laws—those with weak language or nonspecific standards. Such laws were



ABOUT THIS ISSUE BRIEF

This issue brief is based on a research review prepared by Carolyn Beam, Ph.D., Beam Medical Communications, and Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., and Kipling J. Gallion, M.A., University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. The full research review, which includes citations, is available [here](#)

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less likely to have a positive impact on weight status than strong state laws, according to a 2001-2008 analysis.

- Majority-Latino schools were less likely to implement nutritional guidelines for school foods and drinks from the Healthy Schools Program.

Policies that reduce access to snacks and drinks in schools are likely to reduce Latino students' consumption of unhealthy items during the school day.

- After California adopted strict nutrition standards for school snacks in 2007, the availability and consumption of sugary drinks, chips, candy, etc., decreased.
- After the rules, a majority-Latino student population reported drinking more water.
- After the rules, a majority-Latino student population consumed less fat, sugar, and an average of 158 fewer calories per day than students in states with no such rules.

Strong policies that reduce access to snacks and drinks in school have the potential to positively influence Latino students' weight status.

- In California schools with Latino-centric student populations, “strong” policies—those with specific language requiring nutritional standards—were associated with significant improvements in students' overweight trends.
- A 2012 health impact assessment indicated that a national nutrition standard for school snacks and drinks may support a healthy weight and reduced risk of overweight/obesity among Latino students.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Conclusions

- Latino students' nutritional balance is compromised by unrestricted access to unhealthy snack foods and beverages in schools.
- Schools with a high proportion of Latino students tend to have weaker standards for school snacks and drinks. Stronger policies with specific nutrition standards for snacks and drinks in school have the potential to impact students' weight.
- Although many of the above observations apply for all youths, the findings have a stronger influence among Latinos, due to the rising percentage of the U.S. student population that is Latino and this population's high obesity risk.

Policy Implications

- Given that only snack food and beverages policies that have specific nutrition standards have been associated with decreased access to, purchase of, and consumption of these items, final national regulations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide for healthier school snacks must be strong, comprehensive, and consistently enforced across grade levels and venues.
- Because many schools with a high proportion of Latino students currently have no or weak nutrition standards for school snacks and drinks, decision-makers should prioritize helping schools in Latino communities effectively implement finalized federal standards.