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New Study Illuminates How Schools Can Improve Nutrition Standards Without Significant Negative Financial Impact

Chicago, March 21, 2013 – A new study released today by the Illinois Public Health Institute presents case studies of schools that improved nutrition standards for their competitive food and beverages without significant negative financial impact. Competitive foods and beverages are those items sold or provided in schools that are not part of the national school lunch program. Typically these are foods and drinks in vending machines, cafeteria a la carte lines, and school stores. In early February, the USDA proposed new standards for competitive foods that significantly reduce the fat, sugar, and sodium content of foods sold to students by schools. Also in February, CDC released an analysis of [state policies for competitive foods in schools](#) in 39 states. Some schools use revenue from competitive foods to support various programs, and have expressed concern about lost revenue with stronger standards. This study should help allay those fears.

The study, [Controlling Junk Food and the Bottom Line: Case Studies of Schools Successfully Implementing Strong Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods and Beverages](#) includes case studies based on interviews with school district food service staff, principals and other school staff in thirteen middle and high schools in nine school districts around the country. The districts were geographically and socio-economically diverse.

Key findings from the study include:

- Loss of profit was not the most frequently cited concern about changing nutrition standards
- For the districts and schools in the study, “doing the right thing” was more important than profit
- Most respondents had a positive outlook on the future profitability of competitive foods
- Strengthening nutrition standards for competitive foods is associated with increased participation in the USDA reimbursable meal program
- Strong competitive food and beverage standards do not have a more adverse financial impact on low-income school districts compared to higher income districts
- Schools experienced declines in competitive food profits. However, schools report that over time, profits rebounded, and when measured across all food service accounts, profits remained the same or increased.

“What we found is that schools can minimize the financial impact of strengthening the nutrition standards for competitive foods, and that they see the benefits to student health and wellness as well worth the effort,” said Elissa Bassler, CEO of the Illinois Public Health Institute and one of the study’s lead authors. The study also shares information about many of the strategies used by schools and districts to successfully implement the changes, as well

“The information about strategies and approaches described in this study should be extremely helpful over the next few years as districts and schools across the country begin to implement new standards issued by the USDA,” said Dr. Jamie Chriqui, Sr. Research Scientist at the Institute for Health Research and Policy and the University of Illinois at Chicago, the study’s other lead author.

Some of the strategies identified by the study participants include:

- Strong leadership was a key to success
- Changes in policy, comparable to those coming from the USDA, were the impetus for change in most cases
- Engaging students and listening to their feedback was important
- Improving the regular school meal program at the same time that competitive food and beverages standards are changed helped with overall success
- Redesigning cafeterias to make them more appealing places to eat and relax was cited by some schools as important to success
- Schools encouraged staff to lead by example
- Conducting nutrition education in conjunction with changes in food and beverage offerings helped students adapt to new foods

The study was conducted during the 2011-12 school year, and was initiated as a winner of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) 2nd Annual Innovations in Public Health Policy Competition. It was supported by the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion/Division of Population Health and the Policy Research, Analysis, and Development Office (PRADO) in the Office of the Associate Director for Policy at CDC. The competition aims to foster greater awareness of policy as an intervention to support public health goals, inspire cross-agency collaboration within CDC, and promote innovative public health policy projects conducted collaboratively by CDC and the National Network of Public Health Institutes (NNPHI) member institutes.

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