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CLOSING THE GAP ON UNHEALTHY FOOD IN SCHOOLS

BERKELEY, Feb. 14, 2013—Despite the USDA’s latest healthy school meal standards, introduced in September 2012, two out of three elementary school students today can still find their way to a candy bar, bag of chips, or soda during the school day. High school students have even better odds of being able to buy junk food while on campus.

The reason: The majority of schools offer students access to vending machines, school stores, and cafeteria a la carte lines that sell the kinds of foods that put young people at higher risk of diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

But this month, the United States Department of Agriculture released a new proposal to close that gap through the “Smart Snacks in School” rule, which is required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010—the same act that mandated higher standards for school meals. The public is invited to [comment](#) by April 9, 2013.

Also known as the “competitive foods” rule, Smart Snacks in School is designed to make all food sold on campuses during the school day at least as healthy as offerings through the federally reimbursed meal programs.

“We applaud the new proposal for recognizing that good nutrition is essential to student health and academic success,” says Zenobia Barlow, cofounder and executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy, which pioneered the [Rethinking School Lunch](#) and [California Food for California Kids](#) initiatives. “And we encourage all members of the school community, including food service directors and parents, to show their support.”

A 2012 study from the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* found that California teens eat fewer calories at school than students in other states because of the state’s pioneering efforts to address junk food in schools. In 2002, it became the first state to ban soft drinks in grade schools: a move extended to high schools in 2009. In 2007, it also enforced “competitive food” nutrition standards similar to those being proposed by the USDA now.

Smart Snacks in School is the first time the federal government has sought to regulate school foods other than meals in the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. The rules do not apply to school lunches brought from home or foods brought in for birthdays,

holidays, or other special events such as after-school bake sales, fundraisers, and sporting events.

With some exceptions, the rules would require that all available snacks contain:

- No trans fats.
- No more than 200 calories per portion as packaged (including butter, cream cheese, salad dressing, or any other accompaniments).
- No more than 200 mg of sodium per portion.
- At least 10 percent of the Daily Value (DV) of a naturally occurring nutrient of “public health concern,” such as calcium, potassium, vitamin D, and dietary fiber.
- Less than 10 percent of their total calories from saturated fats.
- No more than 35 percent of their total calories from fat.
- No more than 35 percent of calories from total sugars; or no more than 35 percent of their weight from total sugars.
- Fifty percent or more whole grains by weight, or have whole grains listed as the first ingredient on packages.

The rules concerning beverages would require that elementary-age school children be able to purchase unlimited amounts of plain water, or eight ounces of low-fat plain milk, non-fat plain or flavored milk; “nutritionally equivalent” milk alternatives as permitted by school meal requirements; or 100 percent fruit/vegetable juice.

The same rules would apply to beverages available to middle school-age children, although they could do so in 12-ounce quantities. All beverages available to elementary- and middle school-age children would have to be caffeine-free.

High school students could purchase drinks in the same quantities as middle school students. In addition, they could purchase the following outside of meal service areas and ordinary meal times: up to 20 ounces of calorie-free, flavored and/or carbonated water and other beverages that comply with the FDA requirement for “calorie-free” claims (less than 5 kcals/serving). High school students would also be permitted to purchase up to 12 ounces of diet sodas and other flavored beverages, with no restrictions on caffeine.

Numerous groups have praised the proposed guidelines, including the Kids’ Safe and Healthful Foods Project from The Pew Charitable Trusts, School Nutrition Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, and The California Endowment.

The rules would not go into effect until at least one full year after public comment is considered and an implementing rule is published to ensure that schools and vendors have adequate time to adapt.

Learn more and comment [here](#).

The [Center for Ecoliteracy](#) is a nonprofit dedicated to education for sustainable living. Its [Rethinking School Lunch Initiative](#) provides a framework for changing school meal programs, promoting health, and increasing ecological understanding. The Center's [California Food for California Kids Initiative](#) offers a free downloadable cookbook and reports identifying opportunities for improving school meals.

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