



Controlling Junk Food and the Bottom Line Tip Sheet

Finances: Strategies to Maintain Revenues with Healthier Competitive Foods Standards

Tip sheet 1 of 5: Encouraging enrollment in school meal programs • Increasing variety, access, and price of school meals • Comprehensive strategies • Full set of tip sheets available online at <http://iphionline.org/center-for-policy-and-partnerships/controlling-junk-food-and-the-bottom-line>.

Implementation of the new Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards provides an opportunity to offer healthier competitive foods--snacks and à la carte foods and beverages--in schools. This tip sheet, *Strategies to Maintain Revenues with Healthier Competitive Foods Standards*, is one of five tip sheets that share strategies, best practices, and tips from middle schools and high schools in eight districts across the country that participated in the *Controlling Junk Food and the Bottom Line* study in 2012. These districts have improved nutrition standards for competitive foods without experiencing significant financial losses. This document focuses on comprehensive strategies that districts and schools employed to maintain revenues.

Districts reported improving the nutritional value and appeal of the school lunch program at the same time that they implemented stronger competitive food standards, resulting in increased participation in the reimbursable school meal program. Consistent with other research studies,^{1,2,3} six of eight food service directors indicated that profits associated with reimbursable school meals increased once stronger competitive food and beverage standards were implemented. Two of eight responded that profits remained the same. Many respondents also reported increased participation in the breakfast program, helping to improve overall revenues. Many food service directors reported looking at profits across all food service accounts; they did not look at snack food sales income in isolation. As mentioned, when more students participated in the school meal program, overall food service profits stayed the same or improved over time. Here are some of the strategies used by districts in the study.

WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

Strategies to Maintain Revenues

Encouraging enrollment in school meal programs

It is noteworthy that some districts reported that because of the economic downturn, more students had become eligible for free lunches^A. Several respondents from low-income districts suggested that when most students participated in the free lunch program, the school did not rely on competitive food sales. Thus, a drop in competitive food sales is unlikely to have a significant impact on the financial status of districts with high rates of free and reduced-price lunch participation. The Boston Public Schools made a concerted effort to improve the breakfast program at the high school level to increase participation rates; they implemented "grab and go" stations where students choose breakfast foods from a cart and teachers allowed them to eat in class. In Miami-Dade County, some schools hired outreach staff to increase participation in the school meals programs by encouraging families to apply for assistance.

"Kids are participating [more in the meal program], so we have seen our overall revenue increase, year after year. And because of that, I think, the competitive foods and à la carte foods have taken a back seat."

Shamil Mohammed, Interim Food Service Director, Boston Public Schools

^A The new Community Eligibility Provision of the National School Lunch Program offers an option for schools in high poverty areas to serve free lunch and breakfast to all students without documenting family eligibility for each student. In recent 2014 updates, districts in New London, Connecticut; Jackson, Mississippi; and Miami-Dade County reported being able to offer universal free breakfast and lunch, and Corvallis, Oregon was implementing community eligibility in two schools.

All districts used the strategies below to improve the number of food options as well as the variety and taste of foods that are part of the meal program to encourage students to enroll in and consume the full meal (versus buying à la carte foods).

Increasing variety in school meals

As mentioned in Tip sheets 4 and 5, salad bars and sandwich bars were well received by students; giving adolescent students food choices was key to improving consumption of healthier foods. Marshall County Schools in Alabama implemented salad and sandwich bars and increased the number of vegetables offered. Perry County School District in Alabama offered a minimum of two meal choices per day. In a recent update in 2014, the Jackson Public Schools in Mississippi report serving 4 to 5 vegetables per day through the district's federal Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. In another recent update, middle school principal Eric Beasley from Corvallis, Oregon, reported that the salad bar in his school includes at least ten different vegetables daily.

Increasing access to school meals

The Miami-Dade County Public Schools installed healthy meal vending machines with funding from the CDC-funded Communities Putting Prevention to Work program. The food is part of the reimbursable school meal program; students use their ID numbers, not cash, to purchase healthy sandwiches and salads. This strategy increased participation in the meal program. The New London Public Schools in Connecticut were able to maintain revenue by offering extended before- and after-school meal offerings, including breakfast and dinner. Beyond profits and participation, Principal Alison Burdick, of Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School in New London, Connecticut, responded that the extended day structure had also strengthened the school's overall meal program, *"The fact that they're choosing to come early to school to have that breakfast really speaks to the validity of our programming."*

Increasing the price of school meals

Some districts increased the price of the school meal, which was supported by district administration and parents alike. Doug Joersz, food service director in Bismarck, North Dakota, noted that for years, competitive food sales kept the price of the school meal artificially low, and so increasing the price of the meal was essential. In Corvallis School District 509J, the majority of students pay full price for school meals, and the district found support from families for increasing the price because the parents were very interested in improving the nutritional quality of the food served. Corvallis' Food Service Director Sharon Gibson noted that the price increases were small and gradual, a nickel at a time. The experience of those districts that raised prices voluntarily suggests that educating parents on the value of meals is important to acceptance.

"When we knew that we were going to implement this wellness policy, we also understood that it was time to quit relying on à la carte revenue to keep meal prices artificially low. We need to be charging reasonable prices for our reimbursable meals."

Food Service Director Doug Joersz,
Bismarck Public Schools, North Dakota

Comprehensive strategies

As shared in these five tip sheets, pertaining to these eight school districts, implementing comprehensive, multifaceted strategies was the key to maintaining profits after implementing healthier nutrition standards. By listening to students and conducting taste testing, nutrition education, communication with families, nonfood fundraising, organized monitoring, strong wellness committees, collaborating with the community organizations and businesses, faculty and staff training and modeling, and participating in national award programs such as the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and the Healthier US Schools Challenge, districts overcame initial dips in revenues. But it took careful planning, stakeholder engagement, support from the school board and administrators, and food service director passion.

Every district employed multiple strategies, which were supported by principals. School districts with strong wellness committees and policies were successful in gaining support for strong nutrition standards and were also successful in maintaining or regaining profits. Schools, community, families, and students working together can successfully plan for new standards.

Additional strategies

The New London Public Schools prohibited sales of junk food in the school store, driving students to purchase food in the cafeteria. In the Boston Public Schools, Headmaster Caren Walker-Gregory, of the Kennedy Academy for Health Careers, took the idea of nutrition and health seriously and chose to eliminate all competitive food sales by closing the school store. Speaking about this decision, Headmaster Walker-Gregory stated, *“That’s part of our vision and mission. And so because it’s part of our vision and mission it’s a whole school initiative.”*

Some districts introduced healthier competitive foods after summer break. Penny Parham, food service director in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, felt that starting the school year off fresh, without any competitive foods, would help revenues rebound.

A number of districts, including Marshall County Schools in Alabama, reported success in turning off vending machines during mealtimes.

The Perry County School District in Alabama used a comprehensive approach to improving the health of the entire community, where the diabetes rate is very high. Food Service Director Joyce Banks shared that *“In the fall we had a wellness walk where they met at the courthouse and walked to one of the high schools and then were served a nutritious breakfast. So it’s an ongoing process where you involve physical activity with nutritious foods. We had a walk to school day, so that’s how they celebrated.”*

Conclusion

Taking a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to implementing healthier competitive foods standards, along with a strong focus on improving and increasing participation in the free and reduced-price meal program, was effective in helping schools maintain overall school food service revenues. As described in the other tip sheets in this series, the schools in the study combined the focus on the meal program with strategies that engaged students and stakeholders, marketed and promoted the new foods and standards, and reduced access to unhealthy competitive foods. The result was an initial dip in competitive foods profits, followed by a rebound to at, or near, preimplementation levels.

For more ideas, please visit <http://iphionline.org/center-for-policy-and-partnerships/controlling-junk-food-and-the-bottom-line> for four more tip sheets.

¹ Peart T, Kao J, Crawford PB, Samuels SE, Craypo L, Woodward-Lopez G. Does competitive food and beverage legislation hurt meal participation or revenues in high schools? *Childhood Obesity*. 2012; 8(4): 339-346.

² Wojcicki JM, Heyman MB. Healthier choices and increased participation in a middle school lunch program: effects of nutrition policy changes in San Francisco. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2006; 96(9): 1542-1547.

³ Woodward-Lopez G, Gosliner W, Samuels SE, Craypo L, Kao J, Crawford PB. Lessons learned from evaluations of California’s statewide school nutrition standards. *American Journal of Public Health*. 2010; 100(10): 2137-2145.

Resources

USDA: United State Department of Agriculture

Smart Snacks in School Nutrition Standards <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/Legislation/allfoods.htm>

HealthierUS Schools Challenge <http://www.fns.usda.gov/hussc/healthierus-school-challenge>

School Nutrition Environment and Wellness Resources <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/local-wellness-policy-resources/school-nutrition-environment-and-wellness-resources-0>

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Competitive Foods Resource Center <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/nutrition/standards.htm>

State Public Health Actions to Prevent and Control Diabetes, Heart Disease, Obesity and Associated Risk Factors and Promote School Health

<http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/about/statepubhealthactions-prevCD.htm>

School Health Guidelines to Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/rr/rr6005.pdf>

School Health Index <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/SHI/>

Action for Healthy Kids

<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>

Alliance for a Healthier Generation

Healthy Schools Builder <https://schools.healthiergeneration.org/>

Swap Your Snack https://www.healthiergeneration.org/take_action/schools/swap_your_snack/

Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs, Cornell University

Smarter Lunchrooms Movement <http://smarterlunchrooms.org/>

IOM: Institute of Medicine

Stallings, V. A., & Yaktine, A. L., eds. (2007). *Nutrition standards for foods in schools: Leading the way toward healthier youth*. National Academies Press. <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2007/Nutrition-Standards-for-Foods-in-Schools-Leading-the-Way-toward-Healthier-Youth.aspx>

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