



Controlling Junk Food and the Bottom Line Tip Sheet

Student Education and Engagement to Support Healthier Competitive Foods Standards

Tip Sheet 4 of 5: Expanding nutrition education • Increasing variety and choice
Taste-testing and other student feedback • Engaging and communicating with families
Promotion of healthy food items. Full set of tip sheets available online at 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, *Student Education and Engagement to Support Healthier 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 engaging food service staff, teachers, families, administrators, and others to expand nutrition education, increase food variety and choices, provide taste testing for students, engage and communicate with families, and promote healthy food items.

Student education and engagement is critical to implementing healthier competitive foods. Districts in the study used multiple approaches, sometimes simultaneously, to help students transition to the new standards. This tip sheet gives examples of successful strategies, such as expanding nutrition education, increasing variety and choice in the cafeteria, soliciting student feedback through surveys and taste testing, engaging with families, and using innovative communication techniques.

WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

Student Education and Engagement to Support Healthier Competitive Foods

Expanding nutrition education

All eight districts in the study reported that implementing or expanding nutrition education in classrooms helped to reinforce healthy eating messages and to support changes to competitive foods by improving acceptance of healthier snacks and à la carte items. In some schools, nutrition education was provided in the form of formal nutrition curricula for the classroom. Health classes and family and consumer science courses were enhanced with additional nutrition information. Food Service Director Mary Hill, of Jackson Public Schools in Mississippi, reported: “Now when we talk about increasing fruits and vegetables, [students] talk about it in the classroom and they see it in the cafeteria.” Boston Public Schools implemented a nutrition curriculum that is integrated into core subjects, including math and English, as an efficient strategy to incorporate nutrition messages while not adding additional time to the school day.

Several districts, including Jackson Public Schools, reported creating signage and posting nutrition information about food being served. In New London Public Schools in Connecticut, training cafeteria staff on the health benefits of the food they were serving, and how to communicate that to the children, was successful in translating into more nutrition information for students. Bismarck Public Schools (North Dakota) District Dietitian Joan Knoll says: “I go in [to the cafeteria] and announce that I’m there and then have a display in the lunchroom, and then the kids can come up and look at the display and talk to me and ask questions.” Thus she created an open dialogue about healthy eating with students. In a 2014 update, Knoll reported that she now teaches nutrition lessons to every middle school class and most 5th grade classes on topics such as breakfast, My Plate, sugary beverages, and caffeine drinks. The Perry County School District in Alabama reinforced healthy eating through nutrition education in family and consumer science courses as well as health classes.

Other schools incorporated nutrition education in other ways, for instance, as part of athletics programs and by leveraging Farm to School programs for experiential nutrition education through growing food and learning about local fruits and vegetables from farmers. In a 2014 update, the New London Public Schools reported their participation in the FoodCorps program, where the program staff provides nutrition education and introduces students and staff to fruit smoothies using kale, blueberries, and Greek yogurt. A collaborative program with the Smarter Lunchrooms Movement of Cornell University's Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs further enables New London Public Schools to educate students on the benefits of white milk (versus flavored milk), fruits and vegetables, and healthy hot entrées.

Beyond traditional health classes, Boston Public Schools found ways to incorporate nutrition and health into the broader curriculum through projects such as Planet Health¹ and Eat Well and Keep Moving² that integrate messages of nutrition and healthy living into math, history, and language arts classes. Boston's Wellness and Promotions Manager Caitlin Westfall noted that, *"it's not taking away time on learning that a lot of schools are concerned about, rightly so."* Moreover, Boston Public Schools are educating students on preparing meals and snacks that taste good and are healthy and inexpensive. Health Engagement Coordinator Kristin Driscoll highlighted the after-school cooking club at Kennedy Academy, and she explained: *"We're just kind of opening the kids' eyes to kind of what's out there and showing them how to do things that are inexpensive."*

Increasing variety and choice

Most of the schools in the study reported that one of the keys to promoting student engagement and acceptance was offering variety and choice. Salad, fruit, and vegetable bars and make-your-own sandwich bars were used to provide students with healthy choices that resulted in increased school meal participation. Alison Burdick, principal of the Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School in New London, Connecticut, said a key to their success was *"Always seeking new ways to give kids opportunities to eat healthy...variety...an intentional look at menu choices so that the kids are never bored and there's always something new."* Jackson Public Schools allowed children to select the main course and sides for their meals, and even taste some foods right in the lunch line, which reduced waste because students chose foods they enjoyed eating. Cafeteria Manager Darlene Leingang, from Horizon Middle School in Bismarck, North Dakota, shared, *"The children do like [having] the choice of more things with a sub-station line...two hot entrées, two salad bars. I think it gives them more choices and they like that."* Corvallis School District 509J (Oregon) reported that small details, like the color of the bottles, can make healthier beverages attractive to students.

"The biggest thing we've got to do, and have been trying to do, is trying to vary some of the products they have."

Principal Larry Wilson, Douglas Middle School, Marshall County Schools, Alabama

Taste testing and other student feedback

The majority of school districts engaged students through taste testing of food and beverage items for à la carte and school meal items. They reported that taste testing allowed students to have an active voice in choosing food and beverage items that would be available in the cafeteria, and students were more likely to accept items if they had buy-in as well as an opportunity to become familiar with new items. Some districts solicited input directly from students about changes to school meals, snacks, and à la carte items. In Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Food Service Director Penny Parham emphasized that student focus groups are very effective for informing decisions about changes to food service. The Boston Public Schools surveyed students to find out what price point would work best for new menu items. Some principals and food service directors reported sitting with the children in the lunchroom to get feedback in real time, and Principal Burdick of Bennie Dover Jackson Middle School in New London stated that *"I walk through the*

¹ Peterson, K. E. (2007). *Planet Health: an interdisciplinary curriculum for teaching middle school nutrition and physical activity*. Human Kinetics.

² Dart, H. (2007). *Eat well & keep moving: An interdisciplinary curriculum for teaching upper elementary school nutrition and physical activity*. Human Kinetics.

cafeteria line myself to see what kind of service the students are receiving, so if I see an issue I can speak to the issue directly and say I was there, I saw it with my own eyes, and we can address it together.”

To promote acceptance of new fruits and vegetables, Corvallis School District 509J in Oregon selected a fruit or vegetable to highlight each month for taste testing. Once the monthly item was tested by students, Food Service Director Sharon Gibson incorporated it into menus district wide, preparing it at the central kitchen and sending it out to schools.

Gail Sharry, food service director from New London Public Schools in Connecticut, reported several avenues for students to provide feedback. She and administrators occasionally eat lunch with students. *“It seems like everybody likes to come back and let me know if they liked the food or they didn’t. So there’s lots of different ways of getting kids’ feedback.”*

Penny Parham, food service director from Miami-Dade County Public Schools, found that involving students in product choices is critical: *“You can’t just pull the rug out from under children...on what they buy without them having the opportunity to adjust and know what’s coming and make that change.”*

Emphasizing the importance of including students in the menu planning process, Doug Joerz, food service director from Bismarck Public Schools in North Dakota, said: *“I think they sincerely wanted to have some ownership in the process.”*

Engaging and communicating with families

School districts recognized that parents and families play a strong role in supporting healthy eating habits. Thus, many of the school districts extended nutrition education efforts to parents. In Boston Public Schools, the Health and Wellness Department involved parents in workshops about cooking healthy meals on a tight budget. The workshops focused on easily prepared meals that could be made at the end of a long workday. By involving parents, Boston Public Schools aimed to reinforce the healthy eating messages that students received at school and introduce them into the home environment. Alabama’s Perry County School District hosted a Bring Your Parents to Lunch day so that parents could see and taste what their children were eating during the school day.

Other strategies to communicate with parents included newsletters, school district websites, and letters home. These communications allowed the school districts to inform parents of upcoming changes to the school districts’ snack and à la carte items, as well as other nutrition and health messages that are being promoted in the school district.

Finally, many school districts emphasized the important role of parents on the district wellness committee. Committee members may be engaged in all stages of wellness policy adoption and implementation. Including students as wellness committee members in Bismarck Public Schools allowed them to build a sense of shared ownership of changes to snack and à la carte items. Principal Russ Riehl, of Simle Middle School in Bismarck, commented that the process helped with *“...trying to take what [students] see and what we feel would be appropriate for them to have and try to bridge that gap.”*

Promotion of healthy food items

School districts made extensive efforts to increase exposure and availability of healthier food items in the school meal program, as well as in snack and à la carte items. School professionals attributed increased availability of healthy foods and beverages and reinforcement of healthy messaging to higher acceptance of healthy snack and à la carte items. Boston Public Schools reported that a group of students held a healthy food video contest, increasing student

excitement and engagement in the marketing of healthier food service. Corvallis School District 509J partnered with the Corvallis Environmental Center and a local grocery store to promote the district's tasting tables and school menus. The grocery store printed school menus with nutrition messaging in English and Spanish in full newspaper size in exchange for advertising space at the bottom.

Andrew Morton, food service director for Marshall County Schools in Alabama, focused on increasing fruit and vegetable intake through packaged snacks: *"We've added a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables to our menu program...carrotinis, celery sticks or maybe some apple wedges, some grape and apple combinations, we can increase the snackable vegetables for our customers."* Morton emphasized that incremental increases in healthier options facilitated acceptance.

Gail Sharry, food service director of New London Public Schools in Connecticut, recalled: *"I came in '05-'06. That first year...I started changing the menu--getting less processed items and bringing in more foods that we could cook on-site. I also changed the bread gradually. So we went from one slice of white and one slice of whole wheat. You know, white and wheat...and then the following year, we went to all wheat."*

Conclusion

Educating students and engaging both students and families in tasting and marketing healthier foods has a positive impact on student acceptance of healthy foods in school meals as well as through competitive food sales. In a 2014 update, Principal Riehl, of Simle Middle School in Bismarck, North Dakota, has encouraging news: he reported that after several years of healthier nutrition standards, students come into 6th grade expecting and accepting healthier food. He said, *"They know what the new policy is and have had healthy eating education. The school has to now reinforce and remind versus starting from scratch."* The examples in this tip sheet can be replicated as schools across the nation begin implementing stronger standards.

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

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>

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number 3U38HM000520-03 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the National Network of Public Health Institutes. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC or NNPHI.

Thank you to the Kid's Safe and Healthful Food Project for partnering on the development of this tip sheet.