School Vending Machines “Dispensing Junk”

***75 Percent of Drinks and 85 Percent of Snacks Unhealthful, Says CSPI***

A nationwide [survey](http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/dispensing_junk.pdf) of vending machines in middle schools and high schools finds that 75 percent of the drinks and 85 percent of the snacks sold are of poor nutritional value. The study, of 1,420 vending machines in 251 schools, was organized by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) and conducted by 120 volunteers. CSPI contends that all foods sold out of vending machines, school stores, and other venues outside of the official school lunch program should make positive contributions to children’s [diets](http://www.cspinet.org/new/200405111.html) and health.

“It’s hard enough for parents to guide their children’s food choices, but it becomes virtually impossible when public schools are peddling junk food throughout the school day,” said CSPI nutrition policy director Margo G. Wootan. “Many parents who send their kids off with lunch money in the morning have no clue that it can be so readily squandered on Coke, Doritos, and HoHos.”

Of the drinks sold in the 13,650 vending-machine [slots](http://www.cspinet.org/new/200405111.html) surveyed, 70 percent were sugary drinks such as soda, juice drinks with less than 50 percent juice, iced tea, and “sports” drinks. Of the sodas, only 14 percent were diet, and only 12 percent of the drinks available were water. Just 5 percent of drink options were milk but of those, most (57 percent) were high-fat whole or 2 percent milk.

Of the snack foods sold in the machines, candy (42 percent), chips (25 percent) and sweet baked goods (13 percent) accounted for 80 percent of the options. Of 9,723 snack slots in all the vending machines surveyed, only 26 slots contained fruits or vegetables.

While the Department of Agriculture (USDA) sets detailed standards for [nutrient](http://www.cspinet.org/new/200405111.html) content and portion sizes for the official school meals, it currently has little authority to regulate foods sold outside those meals, whether in vending machines or a la carte (snack) lines in cafeterias. According to CSPI, Congress needs to give USDA more authority to regulate such foods in order to preserve the integrity of the federal school lunch program, in which the federal government invests $8.8 billion a year.

“Junk foods in school vending machines compete with, and ultimately undermine, the nutritious meals offered by the federal school lunch program,” said Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA). “Congress should step in and ensure that soda, candy, chips, and cookies don’t become the de facto school lunch. USDA needs to set standards for all foods sold in schools that participate in the federal school lunch program.”

Despite the financial pressures on school systems that lead them to sell junk food in the first place, some schools are voluntarily setting higher nutrition standards for vending machine foods. As it happens, says CSPI, those school districts are doing well financially by doing good—they are not experiencing a drop-off in revenue by switching to healthier foods.

“Though many assume that vending machines will only be profitable if they are stocked with junk foods, we have not seen a loss in revenue by switching to healthier options,” said Carolyn P. Whitehead, the health and physical education coordinator for McComb, Mississippi school district, which now sells only water and 100 percent fruit juice in vending machines. “School administrators need to know that there’s no downside to supporting better nutrition in schools.”

Soda and low-nutrition snack foods are a key source of excess calories in children’s diets, contribute to overweight and obesity, and displace more nutritious foods. Obesity rates have doubled in children and tripled in adolescents over the last two decades. Studies show that children’s soft drink intake has increased, and children who drink more soft drinks consume more calories and are more likely to be overweight than kids who drink fewer soft drinks.

“The underfunding of No Child Left Behind has forced many schools to cut gym classes and prop up Coke machines in their hallways,” said Representative Lynn Woolsey (D-CA). “The legislation that Senator Harkin and I have introduced will, however, help schools improve the quality of foods sold to students. With kids spending much of their waking hours in school, schools should be on the front line of efforts to reduce obesity, overweight, and diet-related disease.”

Senator Harkin and Representative Woolsey are each leading the fight in their respective chambers to give USDA more authority to set nutrition standards for foods sold in schools.

Last September, CSPI published the School Foods Tool Kit, a manual for parents and school administrators who wish to improve school foods by offering a healthy range of drink and snack choices. That kit is available at [www.cspinet.org/schoolfood](http://www.cspinet.org/schoolfood).