

School Lunches Healthier at U.S. Secondary Schools Following National Standards, Study Finds

Standards may be helping smaller schools and those with more racially, ethnically diverse student bodies in particular

Significantly more secondary school students attended schools with healthier lunches in the spring of 2013, the first year of updated school meal nutrition standards, than did two years earlier, according to a study published recently in *Preventive Medicine*. The study also found that, prior to the national standards, students in predominantly white schools and large schools were far more likely than those in more diverse and small schools to have access to healthier lunches, but that after the first year of the national standards many of those differences were no longer significant.

Schools began implementing healthier school meal nutrition standards from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the fall of 2012. To explore the early impact of those standards, study authors surveyed administrators and food service personnel from 948 unique public middle and high schools (collectively referred to as secondary schools) participating in the National School Lunch Program and asked them whether the meals they offered included: sugar-sweetened beverages, candy or regular-fat snacks such as potato chips or cookies, 2% or whole milk, french fries, non-fat milk, whole grains, or fruits and vegetables.

Among middle school students overall in 2012-13:

- Eighty percent attended a school that offered non-fat milk every day, a significant increase from the 72 percent who did in 2010-11.
- Seventy percent attended a school that offered whole grains every day, a significant increase from the 51 percent who did in 2010-11.

Among high school students overall in 2012-13:

- Seventy-three percent attended a school that offered whole grains every day, a significant increase from the 62 percent who did in 2010-11.
- Eighty-seven percent attended a school that offered both fruits and vegetables every day, a significant increase from the 78 percent who did in 2010-11.

“School meals are getting healthier and we found a marked improvement in the year immediately following the roll out of USDA’s updated standards,” said Yvonne Terry-McElrath, a research associate at the University of Michigan who works with Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funded the study. “Some states and school districts have been working to offer healthier meals for years—our study shows that the national standards support those efforts and may be helping to close gaps that were leaving many students without access to nutritious school meals.”

Terry-McElrath and colleagues found stark initial differences based on the racial or ethnic makeup of the student body and on school size. But during the first year of the national standards those differences shrank considerably:

- In 2010-11, the odds of having both fruits and vegetables as well as whole grains available everyday was 2.4 and 2.3 times higher, respectively, for students in predominantly white middle schools than for students in more diverse schools. At the high school level, the odds of having whole grains available daily was almost twice as high for students attending predominantly white schools as for students attending more diverse schools. By the 2012-13 school year, the availability of these nutritious items had increased enough in more diverse schools so that differences were no longer significant.
- In 2010-11, the odds of having non-fat milk available daily was 3.4 times higher for students in large middle schools (more than 1,000 students) than for those in small middle schools (500 students or fewer). Similarly, the odds of having both fruits and vegetables every day were 3.6 times higher for students in large high schools than for those in small schools. Again, by 2013 differences by school size were no longer significant.

The schools surveyed were representative of all public middle and high schools in the 48 states excluding Alaska and Hawaii.

This study adds to a growing body of evidence showing that school meals are getting healthier. Lunches in U.S. elementary schools [were healthier](#) in 2013-14 than they were in 2006-07, with more schools offering whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, and fewer offering french fries, high-fat pizza, and high-fat milk. Other research finds that students are reported to [like the healthier meals](#), they’re eating more of their school lunches and [throwing less food away](#), and [parents are on board](#) with the healthy changes schools are making.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org and follow us on Twitter: @BTGresearch.

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