

Nutrition Policy Changes in Schools and School Districts

One of Eight Brief Reports

YEAR 5 EVALUATION OF ARKANSAS ACT 1220 OF 2003 TO COMBAT CHILDHOOD OBESITY

INTRODUCTION

Obesity is recognized as one of the most pressing health problems currently facing families and communities in Arkansas and in the nation overall. Arkansas Act 1220 of 2003 was the first comprehensive, legislative approach to combating childhood obesity—it mandated statewide policy changes aimed at preventing childhood obesity, including improvements to the nutrition policies of schools and school districts. These policy improvements have included prohibiting “junk foods” from being sold in à la carte lines in cafeterias and school stores, discouraging the use of foods as a classroom reward, and providing healthier foods at school events. This brief report presents key findings from the Year 5 evaluation of nutrition policies in Arkansas public schools and school districts.

As in previous years, our research team at the Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences conducted the evaluation with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. More details from the Year 5 evaluation and complete evaluation reports for Years 1–4 are available at: www.uams.edu/coph/reports/#Obesity.

KEY FINDINGS: NUTRITION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Arkansas public schools and school districts have continued to make healthy changes to their nutrition policies, environments and practices.

District Policies Regarding Student Access to “Junk Foods”

Many districts continued to prohibit the sale of “junk foods”—snacks that provide calories primarily through sugar or fat and offer few vitamins and minerals—in a variety of school venues.

- In Year 5, 62 percent of districts prohibited schools from selling “junk foods” in vending machines, an increase from 18 percent in Year 1.
- The percentage of school districts prohibiting the sale of “junk foods” in cafeteria à la carte lines has increased significantly since Year 1, from 37 percent to 69 percent.



- There also was a significant increase in the percentage of districts prohibiting the sale of “junk foods” in school stores—58 percent of districts did so in Year 5, compared with only 13 percent in Year 1.
- As shown in the table below, many districts adopted stronger nutrition policies voluntarily, before they were mandated by statewide regulations.

School Policies for Cafeteria Milk Options

Schools continued to make low-fat and skim milk more available, and to offer fewer whole milk options for students in cafeterias.

- The percentage of school cafeterias offering skim milk options remained stable from Year 4 to Year 5, and was substantially higher than in Year 1.
- Low-fat varieties of milk were by far the most commonly offered in school cafeterias—96 percent offered low-fat white milk and 81 percent offered low-fat chocolate milk.

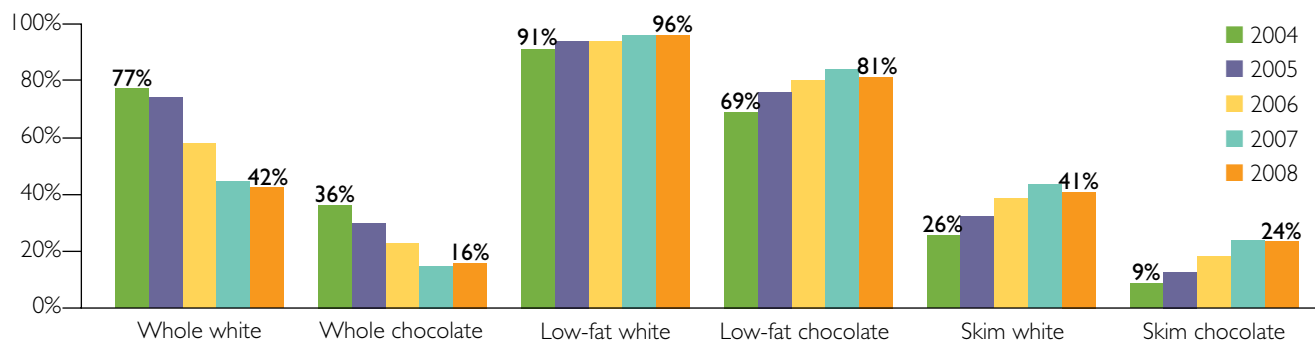
SUMMARY OF SCHOOL DISTRICT NUTRITION POLICIES

District policies	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Policy prohibiting “junk foods” (foods that provide calories primarily through fats or sugars and contain few vitamins or minerals) from being offered in:					
À la carte lines in cafeterias***	37%	32%	58%	63%	69%
Student parties****	2%	5%	21%	29%	21%
After-school programs**	16%	15%	30%	35%	32%
School stores****	13%	18%	50%	57%	58%
Vending machines****	18%	27%	53%	61%	62%
Concession stands*	2%	7%	12%	11%	6%
Policy prohibiting or discouraging use of food or food coupons as rewards in classrooms****	12%	22%	70%	76%	74%
Policy that schools offer students low-fat alternatives to whole milk each day	51%	NA	63%	69%	70%

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001; ****p ≤ .0001

The policies that appear in bold print in Table 1 were either required or recommended by the Arkansas Department of Education.

SUMMARY OF MILK OPTIONS OFFERED IN SCHOOL CAFETERIAS



Note: There were no statistical comparisons completed on these data.

School Policies Regarding Foods at School-Sponsored Events

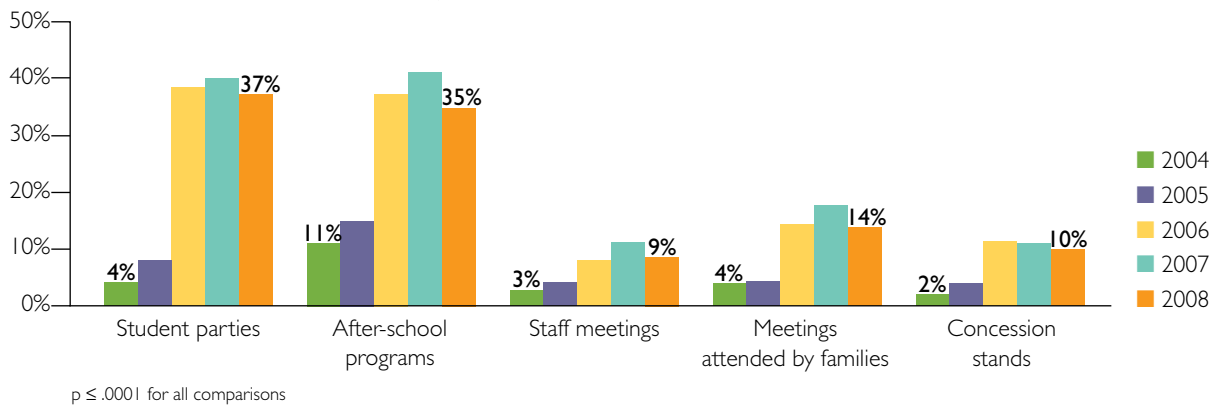
The percentage of schools requiring healthy food options at school-sponsored events dropped over the past two years, but remained significantly higher than it was in Year 1.

- The most dramatic changes in these policies were in those addressing student parties and after-school programs. From Year 1 to Year 5, the percentage of schools requiring healthy options at these events increased 33 percent and 24 percent, respectively.
- While the percentage of schools requiring healthy options at concession stands, meetings attended by families and staff meetings continued to lag behind policies for other school-sponsored events, there has been a significant increase in these areas since Year 1.

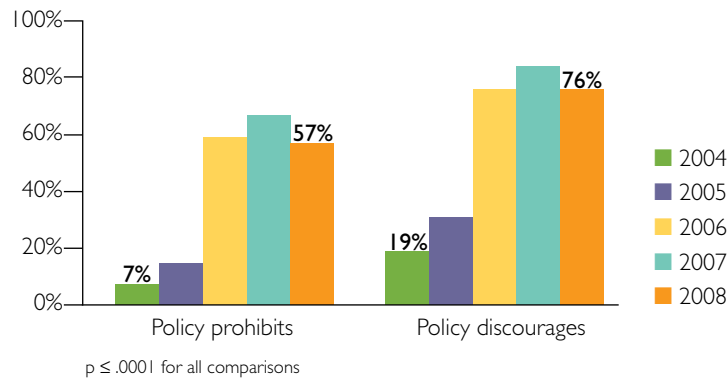
District and School Policies Regarding Use of Foods as a Reward

- As shown in the table on page 2, 74 percent of school districts prohibited or discouraged the use of foods or food coupons as a classroom reward, a significant increase over the 12 percent that did so in Year 1.
- In Year 5, 57 percent of schools prohibited use of foods or food coupons as a classroom reward, up from only 7 percent in Year 1.

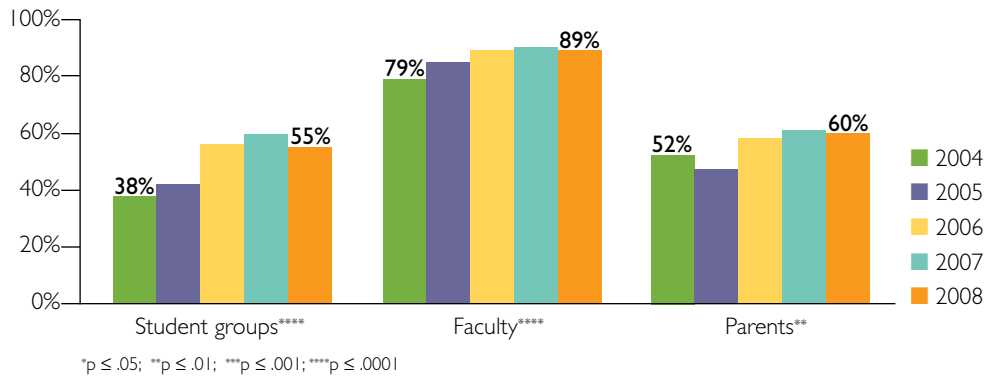
SUMMARY OF POLICIES REQUIRING HEALTHY OPTIONS AT SCHOOL-SPONSORED EVENTS



SCHOOL POLICIES CONCERNING THE USE OF FOODS OR FOOD COUPONS AS A REWARD



POLICIES PROHIBITING THE SALE OF FOOD ITEMS FOR FUNDRAISING BY GROUP



School Changes in Fundraising Policies and Practices

Schools continued to require that fundraising efforts focus on selling non-food items. This was true for the majority of schools across all fundraising groups: students, faculty and parents.

- In Year 5, 55 percent of schools prohibited student groups from selling foods to raise money, a significant increase from 38 percent in Year 1.
- The vast majority of schools, 89 percent, prohibited faculty from selling foods to raise money for the school.

Key Informant Interviews with School- and District-Level Personnel

Interviews with nurses, principals, superintendents and Wellness Committee members revealed strong support for the nutrition policy changes in school cafeterias. Several interviewees endorsed a broad array of changes to create a healthier cafeteria environment for students, including decreasing the amount of fried and pre-packaged frozen foods, limiting sales of snacks,

increasing the availability of low-fat and skim milk choices and offering salad bars. A number of interviewees reported that students initially resisted some of the policy changes, but noted that students have since accepted the healthier offerings. Interviews also revealed initial staff resistance to restricting the types of foods offered at student parties and using foods as classroom rewards, but indicated that many have adjusted to these changes.

Overall, superintendents and other school personnel indicated that the current school nutrition regulations were sufficient and that these regulations should be monitored over time to determine their impact. Several interviewees emphasized the need for accountability and enforcement of the policies at the local and state level. Others voiced concern about the foods children consume at home and believed the potential discrepancy between the home and school food environments might reduce the impact of Act 1220 on student health. School personnel generally did not endorse additional statewide regulations, but were in favor of local initiatives to create healthier school nutrition policies.