

School Fundraising Policies and Practices: A Shifting Landscape

Research Summary, August 2016

Introduction

Between one-third to one-half of children's and adolescents' daily calories are consumed during school hours. Thus, foods and beverages consumed at school can affect children's weight. Consumption of "empty calories" is a major contributor to childhood obesity, and school-wide nutrition practices such as food-related fundraising may be associated with obesity among students. Fundraisers can be especially problematic because junk foods such as sugary baked goods, candies, and sugar-sweetened beverages, which are all leading sources of empty calories, are often sold at these events.

Over the past decade (2006–2016), there have been a variety of changes in the types of foods and beverages that can be served at school. School districts across the nation were required to develop wellness policies by the start of the 2006–07 school year, and in many districts these policies included provisions related to school fundraising practices. Also, following passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) updated nutrition standards for meals and snacks sold to students on school campuses during the school day. These updated standards are known as Smart Snacks in School. The standards require schools to offer healthier foods to children through school food stores, vending machines, and a la carte lines, while limiting junk food. Smart Snacks standards also cover foods and beverages sold at fundraisers held on campus during the school day, though states are allowed to establish an exemption policy for occasional fundraising events. Approximately half of states across the country allow such exemptions for fundraisers to sell foods and beverages that do not meet Smart Snacks standards.



Schools are finding ways to fundraise through fun, dynamic activities like community fitness events, which also support the health of their students in addition to many teachers and parents who participate. Flickr/Tom Cole

This summary is based on a commissioned report prepared by Lindsey Turner, PhD, Boise State University.

The report, which includes the study methods and full results, is available at:
https://education.boisestate.edu/healthyschools/files/2016/08/FR_FINAL_JULY2016.pdf

This project examines the impact of Smart Snacks standards on fundraising practices in districts and schools in a sample of states that either prohibit or allow fundraiser exemptions. This study used a series of interviews with key stakeholders to confidentially and candidly explore the successes, challenges, and financial aspects of implementing fundraiser policies. It also examines the extent to which schools have transitioned successfully to non-food fundraising strategies. Thirty-seven interviews were conducted between September and November 2015. Participants included state-level child nutrition directors; district-level leadership; district food service directors (FSDs); school-level leadership; and parents or leaders of local, regional, or state parent-teacher organizations.

Results

Schools have made great strides in improving the school nutrition environment in recent years, but this has sometimes come at a financial cost to schools and school districts. However, many schools have found successful replacements for junk food fundraisers, with substantial revenues generated from these healthier strategies. For all of the schools participating in this project, fundraising provides essential financial support for student educational services. Therefore, it is crucial to identify fundraising strategies that both meet schools' very real financial needs and also support student health.

Several key themes emerged from the interviews:

- Across most school districts, including those that have been working on wellness for some time, changes related to foods served at fundraisers can be slow to implement, accept, and institutionalize—not unlike the challenges some schools went through as they improved school meal and snack offerings.
- Local school wellness policies paved the way for transitioning to healthier school fundraising practices, even though this was not originally a required element of wellness policies and most fundraising provisions are written as recommendations rather than requirements.
- School fundraising revenues vary widely, depending on state and community socioeconomic factors. While some districts use fundraising as one of a number of approaches to meet budgetary shortfalls that impact basic educational operations, others turn to fundraisers primarily for extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, and travel.
- USDA's Smart Snacks standards limit junk food sold as a part of on-campus fundraisers that occur from midnight until 30 minutes after school is dismissed for the day; however, any foods meeting these standards can be sold as part of a fundraiser on campus at any time. To adjust for limits during the school day, some schools have shifted to events held off-campus or after the school day.
- Changes in foods and beverages sold through vending machines and student-run school stores as a result of Smart Snacks standards and other policies have also reduced schools' discretionary funds in some cases.
- Almost all district-level child nutrition professionals have concerns about their role in monitoring and enforcing new fundraising policies. However, a majority are highly committed to child nutrition and want to improve fundraising practices.
- Many schools have implemented healthier fundraising practices, in some cases despite significant pushback from students, parents, and other stakeholders. A successful common element those schools share is a wellness champion—that is, someone at the school who advocates for practices that support student wellness.
- School principals need not be the wellness champions themselves, but their support for the champion—and for the cause—is essential.
- Principals and food service professionals need continued training and technical support regarding the Smart Snacks standards and their application to fundraisers.
- There is no clear consensus on how many fundraisers should be exempt from Smart Snacks standards in states that allow exemptions, or how to determine which groups get the exemptions. These issues do not arise in schools with zero exemptions.

Conclusion

Given the detrimental effects of junk food on children's health and academic outcomes, efforts to reduce exposure to empty calories during the school day have enormous potential to benefit students. It is crucial that sufficient time be allowed for the implementation of Smart Snacks standards for fundraising events without jumping to premature conclusions about their value or feasibility.

Although fundraising changes have been challenging, the good news is that many schools have successfully been able to shift

to other strategies and raise substantial amounts of money with non-food-related fundraising or through healthy fundraising. Perhaps the most promising of these strategies are physical-activity related fundraiser activities such as field days, fun runs, and community fitness events—these approaches have the added benefit of supporting, rather than compromising, student health while also raising funds for schools.

Overall, the factors that appear to be key to the successful implementation of healthier fundraising practices—regardless of whether states allow exemptions—are time, patience, champions, and collaboration across multiple levels.



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The findings in this research summary are based on the results of interviews commissioned by Healthy Eating Research (HER) and funded through a rapid-response grant. This round of HER's rapid-response funding is focused on addressing research gaps related to nutrition and physical activity policy priority areas as identified by the American Heart Association's Voices for Healthy Kids (VFHK) initiative staff and partners.

About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University and the University of Minnesota School of Public Health under the direction of Mary Story, PhD, RD, program director, and Laura Klein, MPH, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially in lower-income and racial and ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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