

Reducing Student Exposure to Digital Food and Beverage Marketing

Issue Brief, July 2022

Digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and adolescents is pervasive and undermines healthy eating. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students' time spent online for both recreation and school using educational technology doubled from 3.8 to 7.7 hours per day for 12- to 13-year-olds, and racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities widened with children of color and those from families with low incomes spending more time online. As schools continue using educational technology beyond the pandemic, policy interventions to limit digital food marketing in schools and on school-issued devices are needed.

The *Reducing Student Exposure to Digital Food and Beverage Marketing* report highlights four areas where state and local education authorities can play a role in reducing digital food marketing through their own policies and provides model policy language for each. State and local policies are needed because the United States Department of Agriculture's policy for food marketing in schools provides little guidance on how to address digital food marketing. Federal and state privacy protections, which prevent disclosure of student data, are inadequate. This brief provides a summary of four areas that can be considered for state and local policy intervention. See the [full report](#) for model policy language and additional background on the study.



1. Content filtering on school networks and on school-issued devices

Content filtering limits material students can access on school networks (i.e., in school) and can also limit material on school-issued devices when used outside of school. Content filtering is achieved by using services that maintain categories of URLs that a school can block or allow students to access and by using ad-blocking software or services. Several states have received federal COVID-19 relief funds specifically for internet filtering.

Recommendations	Existing Policy or Standard Practice for Incorporation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Include food-related content as a content filter category on school networks and school-issued devices. ■ Utilize robust ad-blocking technology on school networks and all school-issued devices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Acceptable-Use Policy ■ Content Filtering Policy ■ School-Issued Device Settings ■ School Nutrition Policy ■ School Wellness Policy

2. Digital instructional materials

Digital instructional materials are online materials that teachers typically use to supplement a comprehensive curriculum. Digital materials differ substantially from printed materials because many are offered at no cost, can contain ads, and can collect data about students.

Recommendations	Existing Policy or Standard Practice for Incorporation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Do not use digital instructional materials with food and beverage marketing or recommend students use them.Utilize a robust student privacy policy to minimize the collection of student data by digital materials.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Approved List of Digital MaterialsPrivate Contracts with VendorsSchool-Issued Device SettingsSchool Nutrition PolicySchool Wellness PolicyStudent Privacy Policy

3. Student-owned devices

Student-owned devices can access the internet through data plans that are not subject to school content filters. The use of screens while eating promotes distracted eating and overeating, as well as increased consumption of low-quality food and beverages due to the influence of digital food and beverage marketing—all of which contribute to weight gain and the development of childhood obesity. Dedicating the lunch period as predictable screen-free time in schools at all grade levels may be beneficial to the health and well-being of students by decreasing exposure to digital marketing and dissociating meals from screen time.

Recommendations	Existing Policy or Standard Practice for Incorporation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Expand student-owned device use policies to prohibit use during lunch.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cell Phone or Electronic Device Use PolicySchool Wellness Policy

4. Use of social media to communicate with parents and students

Schools often use social media to communicate with parents and students because these platforms are free of charge and are already widely adopted by the public. More recently, parents and teachers have become concerned about the impact of social media exposure on children's well-being. Schools can address social media exposure by ensuring that students and families are not obligated to use social media platforms laden with harmful content like unhealthy food marketing to access school-related information. Instead, they can use any of the various communication platforms and social networking tools that are designed specifically for schools.

Recommendations	Existing Policy or Standard Practice for Incorporation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Communicate school-related and student activity-related information to parents and students on school-dedicated platforms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Electronic Communication or Social Media PolicySchool Wellness Policy

Suggested Citation

Wilking C, Moukalled S, Polacsek M. Research Brief: Reducing Student Exposure to Digital Food & Beverage Marketing. Healthy Eating Research: Durham, NC; 2022. Available at <https://healthyeatingresearch.org>

This brief is based on the report: *Reducing Student Exposure to Digital Food and Beverage Marketing*