

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, and the University of Michigan Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Unit

Healthy Food Choices: Can Schools Improve Their Grades?

Americans are increasingly worried about the problem of childhood obesity in their communities (see [Vol 7, Issue 2](#)). School food and drinks, whether in cafeterias or in vending machines, can contribute to diets high in calories and fat. Although federal and state programs encourage schools to provide healthy choices, menus are managed locally. Very little is known about parents' views of the foods available in 2009 at their children's schools. What parents think is important: in September, Congress will consider the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, which funds school breakfast and lunch programs.

The CS Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health conducted a survey in May 2009, to measure parents' opinions about healthy food choices at their children's public schools (about 67 million students). Nationwide, 33% of parents give their children's schools an "A" grade for offering healthy food choices. On the other hand, 12% give their children's schools a "D" or an "F". Of note, as shown in Table 1, parents give primary schools much better grades for healthy food (37% "A"; 10% "D"/"F") than they give secondary schools (21% "A"; 18% "D"/"F").

Table 1. Report Card for Healthy Food Choices, In Public Schools, by School Level

Grade	All Schools	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
A	33%	37%	21%
B	36%	36%	35%
C	19%	17%	26%
D	8%	7%	10%
F	4%	3%	8%

Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2009

Parents who rate childhood obesity as a big problem for children in their communities give schools lower grades (25% "A"; 15% "D"/"F") for healthy food choices than do parents who do not rate childhood obesity as a big problem (37% "A"; 11% "D"/"F").

Parents' grades for healthy food choices in public schools do not differ by household income, region of the country or by race/ethnicity.

Report Highlights

- Nationwide, 1 out of 3 parents give public schools an "A" for healthy food choices
- 1 out of 8 parents give schools a "D" or "F" for healthy food choices.
- Parents of primary school students give better grades for healthy food choices than parents of secondary school students.

Implications

In the next few weeks, Congress will shape the next 5 years of federal support for school breakfasts and lunches for low-income kids. Given public concern about childhood obesity, and higher levels of concern about school food among parents who believe obesity is a major health problem, Congress can lead on this issue by raising nutritional standards for its programs. But local school decisions will always remain very important. That means that parents must engage their children's schools on this issue directly in order to improve schools' healthy food choices.

Data Source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Knowledge Networks, Inc, for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in May 2009 to a randomly selected, stratified group of parents aged 18 and older (n=1,087) from the Knowledge Networks standing panel that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 59% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 1 to 6 percentage points.

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