



Does District Policy Impact Food Advertising Practices in US Elementary Schools?

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Objective: The United States Institute of Medicine has concluded that food and beverage marketing has an influence on children's dietary behavior, and recommends that school marketing practices should support healthy diets. This study examined the nationwide prevalence of in-cafeteria advertising in US elementary schools, and how those practices varied by school characteristics and by district policy.

Methods: We used mail-back surveys to gather information on advertising (e.g., posters) in school cafeterias. The types of products assessed were: 1) milk; 2) fruits or vegetables (FV); and 3) candy, soda or fast food. Surveys were completed by school administrators at nationally-representative samples of US public elementary schools during the 2006–07, 2007–08, 2008–09, and 2009–10 school years (578, 748, 641, and 680 schools, respectively). We also gathered information on corresponding school district policies regarding in-school marketing.

Results: Advertising for milk increased over time, from 72.8% to 82.5% of schools between 2006–07 and 2009–10 ($p < .01$). Advertising for milk did not change significantly over the four years (from 70.9% to 74.1%). Advertising for unhealthy items was very rare ($< 2\%$ of schools for all years). Milk advertising was more common where district policy recommended or required healthy marketing (Odds Ratio = 1.42; 95% CI = 1.07, 1.88; $p < .05$). Likewise, FV advertising was more common where district policy recommended or required healthy marketing (Odds Ratio = 1.33; 95% CI = 1.00, 1.76; $p < .05$). Milk ads were more common in schools serving high percentages of students eligible for subsidized lunches (i.e., lower-income schools).

Conclusions: Although advertising for unhealthy products was rare, only three-fourths of schools had advertising for healthy products. District policies were associated with school advertising, and revising and strengthening policies may be an effective strategy for supporting healthy marketing in schools.