



## **Nutrition Education in US Elementary Schools: Policies Matter**

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**Objective:** The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies nutrition education as a crucial aspect of comprehensive health education programs; however, as of 2006, elementary students received an average of only 3.4 hours of classroom instruction annually on nutrition and dietary behavior. This study examined whether elementary school nutrition education practices varied by school characteristics, and how those practices were influenced by district policy and state law.

**Methods:** We gathered information on school practices via mail-back surveys from school administrators at nationally-representative samples of US public elementary schools during the 2007–08, 2008–09, and 2009–10 school years (748, 641, and 680 schools, respectively). We also gathered information on corresponding school district policies and relevant state laws regarding nutrition education.

**Results:** The prevalence of nutrition education did not change significantly over time; over the three year period, respondents at 72.8% of schools reported that the school provided formal classroom instruction on nutrition. Multivariate logistic regression showed that nutrition education was less prevalent in suburban versus urban schools (Odds Ratio = .71; 95% CI = .52, .97;  $p < .05$ ), and in schools with a majority of Black students (Odds Ratio = .56; 95% CI = .34, .94;  $p < .05$ ). Nutrition education was more prevalent in small schools (Odds Ratio = 1.41; 95% CI = 1.05, 1.91;  $p < .05$ ). Having a strong district policy addressing nutrition education was a significant predictor of school practices (Odds Ratio = 1.43; 95% CI = 1.10, 1.87;  $p < .01$ ), but state law was not associated with school practices.

**Conclusions:** Despite the importance of nutrition education, many elementary schools do not provide formal classroom instruction on this topic. However, strengthening district policies may be an effective strategy for changing school practices.