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Movement to ban school junk food gets a big boost;
Expert advisers to Congress issue snack guidelines

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Schools across the country should boot out junk-food offerings and adopt better nutrition standards for the extra foods children buy during the school day, a prestigious federal advisory group said Wednesday.

The Institute of Medicine, which advises Congress on health and science, issued new guidelines that recommend schools stop offering soft drinks, candy, cookies, snack cakes, regular potato chips and other high-fat, high-calorie foods and beverages in vending machines, a la carte lines, stores and at fundraising events and holiday parties.

Instead, schools, which would have to voluntarily adopt the recommendations, should be offering foods such as apples, raisins, carrot sticks, fruit cups, some granola bars, bottled water, yogurt and non-fat or low-fat milk.

The landmark report, prepared by food and nutrition experts, addresses discretionary purchases of "competitive" foods but does not cover bagged lunches that children bring to school or what's served in the federal school lunch and breakfast programs.

Some schools have limited the sale of soft drinks and highly processed foods on their campuses, but experts see the institute's report as adding momentum to a national effort to curb childhood obesity.

If adopted by school districts across the country, the guidelines could have a far-reaching effect on 50 million children.

These guidelines "could dramatically improve the dietary intake of all the school-aged children," says Virginia Stallings, chairwoman of the institute committee and director of the Nutrition Center at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia.

Critics have charged for years that schools have become junk-food free-for-alls and called for tougher standards on what's offered because of concern over childhood obesity.

About one-third of children and teens in the USA are overweight or obese, which puts them at risk of developing type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and other health problems.

Only about 20% of school districts have nutrition standards for foods sold outside of school-prepared meals, says Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington, D.C.-based consumer group. "We desperately need these standards to be the law of the land. We need Congress to get junk food out of schools."

On school days, children get 30% to 50% of their calories there, she says. "They eat lunch, one or two snacks and sometimes even breakfast. What they are fed in school has a huge impact on their diets now and the attitudes about food over their lifetime."

Many parents who are trying to feed their children well find their efforts "are undermined when their kids go to school and use their lunch money to buy HoHos and Gatorade instead of a balanced school meal," Wootan says.

And kids learn by example, she says. "You don't want to teach kids nutrition in the classroom and then send them into the hallway with vending machines stocked with candy, chips and soda."

Janey Thornton, president of the School Nutrition Association, which represents more than 55,000 school food service directors and cafeteria employees, says there are "some conscientious districts that will apply the recommendations, but others will say 'There's nothing that says we have to do this,' and they'll keep doing exactly what they are doing right now."

"We need congressional action so that every schoolchild across the country is offered a nutritionally sound diet based on the latest scientific evidence and common sense," she says.

These kinds of changes can't be made overnight, says Penny McConnell, director of Food and Nutrition Services for the Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools. "This would have to be a gradual thing. We have to offer foods that children will select and eat."

Others say the real culprit behind childhood obesity is inactivity.

"Kids are far less active now than they were years ago," says Rick Berman, executive director of the Center for Consumer Freedom, a group financed by the **restaurant** and food industry. "Kids have far more opportunities to be sedentary and far fewer opportunities to be active in school and out of school."