

Results of the third school nutrition dietary assessment study published

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A special Supplement to the February 2009 issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* presents findings from the recently released Third School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study (SNDA-III), conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., as well as research from other studies using SNDA-III data. Sponsored by the Food and Nutrition Service of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), SNDA-III assesses the quality and contributions of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP), longstanding government efforts to bring good food to the children of America.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), created in 1946, currently operates in nearly all public and many private schools in the United States, providing subsidized meals to more than 30 million children each school day. More than 10 million children also take advantage of the School Breakfast Program (SBP), which became a permanent federal program in 1975.

SNDA-III examines the school food environment, children's dietary behaviors at school and outside of school and child overweight/obesity. SNDA-III was based on a nationally representative sample of 130 public School Food Authorities (districts that offer federally subsidized school meals), 398 schools within those districts and 2,314 public school students in grades 1-12 in 287 of these schools. Data were collected in the second half of school year 2004-2005 from district foodservice directors and their staff, school foodservice managers, principals, students and their parents. In addition, field interviewers who were

collecting data from students and parents observed and recorded the types of competitive foods available in visited schools.

Supplement Guest Editor Mary Story, PhD, RD, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota, emphasizes the importance of the SNDA-III study. She writes, "Results of SNDA-III show that many schools have improved the nutritional quality of the NSLP and SBP school meals and foods sold outside of the reimbursable meal programs (competitive foods). However, there is much more room for improvement. Schools need to do even more to reduce the availability of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and make school meals more nutritious. Although the majority of US schools offer breakfasts and lunches that meet the standards for key nutrients (such as protein, vitamins A and C, calcium and iron), reimbursable school meals remain too high in saturated fat and sodium, and children are not consuming enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Many public schools are constrained in providing better meals because of limited funds. It is time to reexamine the formulas used to set national reimbursement rates with reference to the costs of producing and serving school meals that meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005."

"As an Institute of Medicine expert panel considers revisions to the meal patterns and nutrition standards for USDA's school meal programs and Congress takes up reauthorization of the school nutrition programs again in 2009, the SNDA-III findings are particularly important," commented Anne Gordon, PhD, a senior researcher at Mathematica in Princeton, NJ, who led the SNDA-III analysis. "Future studies will look back to SNDA-III to examine how school meals and school food environments have changed after implementation of subsequent federal policy initiatives. SNDA-III data could also be used to estimate the potential effects of proposed changes in policy on schoolchildren's diets."

Clare Miller, MS, RD, a nutrition consultant and member of the

American Dietetic Association School Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group, offers a commentary on the key findings of SNDA-III, and identifies many areas of concern for food and nutrition professionals, as well as for policymakers and parents. She notes, for example, that few schools provided lunches that met the recommendations in the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for fiber and none of the schools met the recommended sodium limitations. Also, she discusses the availability of competitive foods in public schools and how, regardless of whether children ate a school lunch, the competitive foods purchased were generally low-nutrient, energy-dense foods, including candy, desserts, salty snacks, french fries, muffins, donuts, sweet rolls, toaster pastries and caloric beverages other than milk or 100% fruit juice.

In a second commentary, Nancy Montanez Johner, Undersecretary, Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services at the US Department of Agriculture, emphasizes the need for studies such as SNDA-III to address critical challenges that remain to make the programs as effective as they can be in meeting the needs of participating children. Although more than 70% of schools serve meals that meet standards for many nutrients that contribute to healthful diets, few schools (6% to 7%) met all nutrition standards in school year 2004-2005, primarily because most meals served contain too much fat, too much saturated fat or too few calories. Although most schools offer the opportunity to select a balanced meal, few students make the more healthful choice.

The Special Supplement continues with nine research contributions coauthored by staff from Mathematica that expand on the findings of SNDA-III. The first describes the background and study design including complete details of the sampling methods and study limitations. "Because the SNDA-III study is comprehensive, recent and nationally representative, it provides not only a clear picture of the meals currently eaten by many of our nation's children, but also a strong foundation for future policy development and research," said Mary Kay

Crepinsek, a senior researcher at Mathematica who oversaw the compilation of the special supplement.

Four articles present the central SNDA-III results regarding the nutrient content of school meals as offered and served, students' nutrient intakes on school days, foods offered in school meals and in breakfasts and lunches consumed by students and the availability and consumption of competitive foods in school.

Two further articles examine students' consumption of low-nutrient, energy-dense foods at home, school or other locations and the relationship of the school food environment to their dietary behaviors. Two final articles tie the SNDA-III results to the data on children's body mass index to assess the effects of the school meal programs, the school environment and dietary behaviors on children's weight status and child obesity. The Supplement closes with a summary of the findings and policy implications.

The Supplement is published with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "Improving the nutritional quality of the foods that schools serve their students - and holding officials accountable for that quality - is critically important if the country hopes to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic," said C. Tracy Orleans, senior scientist and distinguished fellow at the Foundation. "Results from the latest national dietary assessment illustrate the progress that has been made as well as the problems we still confront. They definitely should help guide local, state and national policy-makers."

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