

'Cupcake bans' rare, but policies may reduce overexposure to sugary treats

October 2 2013, by Sherri McGinnis González



Nearly 1 in 3 American children are overweight or obese, but sugary sweets are often on the menu at elementary school classroom parties.

But schools with a district policy or state law discouraging sugary foods

and beverages were 2.5 times more likely to restrict those foods at parties than were schools with no such [policy](#) or law, according to a new study published online in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

Researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago examined the linkages among state laws, district, and [school](#)-level policies for classroom birthday and holiday parties. More than 1,200 [elementary schools](#) in 47 states responded to surveys during the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years.

The researchers collected corresponding district policies and [state laws](#) and examined whether they addressed classroom parties. When policies addressed parties, most were written as recommendations, not as outright restrictions. Forty-nine percent of schools were located in districts recommending limits on sweets, and 18.5 percent of schools were subject to recommendations at both the district and state levels.

Approximately half the schools had either no restrictions or left the decision to teachers; one-third had school-wide policies discouraging sugary items; and fewer than 10 percent actually banned sweets during holiday parties or did not allow parties.

The study shows that "policies can affect school practices, even when the policies are only recommendations," said Lindsey Turner, lead author of the study and research scientist at UIC's Institute for Health Research and Policy.

Previous small-scale studies have found that "kids consume a lot of calories at classroom parties," said Turner. But little is known about how state and district policies impact this aspect of the school [food](#) environment.

"This is an overlooked aspect of the school food environment, and an important issue to address," said Turner, who noted that classroom parties can contribute a substantial amount of caloric intake for children over the course of a school year. Restrictions on classroom celebrations have often been met with controversy and resistance from parents and the community, and "changing norms will take time," she said.

National [recommendations](#) include limiting parties to one per month; serving only healthy foods, offering non-food items in goody-bags, and having party activities that do not involve food.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued nationwide standards governing competitive foods and beverages in schools as required by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. However, the USDA regulations do not address foods and beverages served during school parties.

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

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