

School 'nutrition report cards' spur healthy choices

December 11 2013, by Blaine Friedlander

Step away from that ice cream sandwich: Point-of-sale technology may help students eating in school cafeterias refrain from devouring junky frozen treats, flavored drinks and potato chips when their parents receive "nutrition report cards."

"This pilot study underscores that a [nutrition](#) report card is feasible and efficient. ... Although the results are preliminary, they suggest that [nutrition [report cards](#)] may be helpful in nudging children toward more healthy, less expensive options ... at little cost to the school district," according to Cornell behavioral economists Brian Wansink and David Just.

Many school districts use a POS, or point-of-sale, payment system, where the food is keyed into a smart [cash register](#). Students use a specialized debit-card, so the system knows the name of the student. For example, if a student buys hot lunch and an ice cream sandwich, the cash register records the purchases. Parents would sign up to receive an electronic nutrition report card weekly or monthly detailing what their child eats.

The researchers found that after receiving nutrition report cards, some [parents](#) adjusted family dinner meals to include more nutritious food, and some parents used the opportunity to discuss the importance of health and nutrition with their kids. Other parents learned why the child's cafeteria money account was depleted so rapidly.

Students whose parents received the nutrition report cards selected fruits and vegetables more frequently, and they selected flavored milk less frequently than the control group.

After the research, in open-ended responses, parents expressed appreciation for knowing what their children ate. One parent responded: "I like seeing the snacks they purchased. It made me understand why my one son was always out of money on his account."

Nutrition report cards have the feature of engaging parents in their child's decision-making process. This could be especially beneficial to younger children, who are learning to make independent food decisions and can be guided by concerned parents, say the researchers.

The study, "Nutrition Report Cards: An Opportunity to Improve School Lunch Selection," was published in *PLOS ONE* in October 2013. Richard W. Patterson, Cornell doctoral candidate in policy analysis and management, and Laura E. Smith, Cornell doctoral candidate in nutritional sciences, were co-authors with Wansink and Just.

More information: Wansink B, Just DR, Patterson RW, Smith LE (2013) Nutrition Report Cards: An Opportunity to Improve School Lunch Selection. *PLoS ONE* 8(10): e72008.. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0072008](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0072008)

Provided by Cornell University

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