

# Most schools meet USDA drinking water mandate, more steps needed to encourage consumption

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A new USDA mandate calling for access to free drinking water during lunchtime at schools participating in the National School Lunch Program went into effect at the start of the 2011-12 school year. Researchers from the University of Michigan and University of Illinois at Chicago examined compliance with the new requirement as well as perceptions about drinking fountain cleanliness and water quality. The study found that most schools met the new requirement; however, additional measures are needed to promote better access and encourage students to drink more water. Their findings are published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*.

Water plays a key role in overall health. Yet, fewer than one-third of children and teens meet the recommended daily [water](#) intake for their age group, and one-fourth of adolescents drink less than one serving of water a day. In lieu of water, many kids drink sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), which can contribute to obesity and dental problems.

The USDA requirement was designed to give students better access to free [drinking water](#) during lunchtime. Investigators found that most schools met the requirement through drinking fountains in the cafeteria, water pitchers on lunch tables, cups to use at drinking fountains, or by providing free bottled water. While most schools were in compliance with the new regulations, the study found that schools in the South were more likely to meet the requirement than schools in any other region of

the United States. "This is consistent with other nationally-representative research showing that [school](#) districts in the South have made faster progress in developing nutrition-related school wellness policies, and that they have stronger policies than do districts in other regions of the US," says corresponding author Lindsey Turner, PhD, Research Scientist at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The study also looked at potential obstacles that might prevent students from taking advantage of free drinking water. Researchers found that although most study respondents indicated that the drinking fountains in their school were "clean" or "very clean," there was still worry about drinking fountain cleanliness. Water quality was also an issue, with about one-quarter of middle and [high school students](#) attending schools where respondents indicated they were at least "a little" concerned about the quality of the drinking water.

Another issue that might prevent students from fully utilizing the free drinking water is ease of access and use of drinking fountains. "Although many schools rely on water fountains," explains Dr. Turner, "fountains may not be very effective at encouraging water consumption. The elementary students may need permission to get up, and if water is not available on the table with the meal, students must make a special trip and may have to wait in line to get water. So in terms of practicality, drinking fountains may not meet the need for access to water during meals."

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics reports that between 1977 and 2001, soft drink consumption increased 48% among children ages 2 to 18 years old. The rising rate of kids drinking SSBs is associated with a decrease in milk consumption. The Academy states that soft drinks "have a dilutional effect on the intakes of many essential micronutrients" and raise children's total energy intake, which can contribute to obesity.

By making clean drinking water easily accessible to the over 30 million children participating in the National School Lunch Program, schools are taking the first steps towards decreasing the amount of SSBs children are likely to consume; however, there is still a long way to go before kids are getting their daily recommended amount of water.

"With regard to changing student behaviors, nutrition professionals are credible messengers and are likely to be well-positioned to promote water consumption through educational activities," concludes Dr. Turner. "Collaboration among school staff such as administrators, nurses, teachers and other members of school wellness councils may be a particularly effective strategy to promote [water consumption](#) as part of creating a healthful school environment."

**More information:** "Availability of Drinking Water in US Public School Cafeterias," by Nancy Hood, PhD; Lindsey Turner, PhD; Natalie Colabianchi, PhD; Frank Chaloupka, PhD; Lloyd Johnston, PhD, *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, [DOI: 10.1016/j.jand.2014.02.001](#)

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