

Alternative Foods in the School Environment

Definition

“Alternative foods” refers to any foods or drinks sold or served on school grounds other than meals served by the school food service program.*

- ✓ Alternative foods include a la carte offerings; food and beverages in vending machines, snack bars, school stores and concession stands; food and beverages sold as part of school-sponsored fundraising activities; and refreshments served at parties, celebrations and meetings.

The Problem

- ✓ While foods made available through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) must comply with federal regulations, there are no specific standards pertaining to the nutritional content of alternative foods.
- ✓ The most common types of food offered in school vending machines are soft drinks, chips, desserts and candies.
- ✓ Studies have found that, even in school cafeteria a la carte lines, the most common snacks and beverages offered are desserts, ice cream, chips, juices, and juice drinks.
- ✓ Some schools market juice drinks as a la carte items; many students purchase them and omit milk from their school lunch.
- ✓ According to USDA’s Jan. ’01 report, *Foods Sold in Competition with USDA School Meal Programs: A Report to Congress*, foods and drink sold in competition with school meals: (1) pose diet-related health risks; (2) may stigmatize participation in school meal programs; (3) may affect the viability of school meal programs; and (4) convey a mixed message to students.

What Schools Can Do

- ✓ In the absence of strong federal standards, some states and districts have developed their own, more comprehensive policies. State and district policies can address the following:
 - Vending machine placement and hours of operation
 - Beverage and food vending sales contracts
 - Nutritional content of foods and beverages available.

*For the purpose of this document the term “alternative foods” is used with the above definition. The term “competitive foods” is sometimes used with this definition in other works – such as the National Association of the State Boards of Education (NASBE). In this document “competitive foods” is defined only as food or drink sold in competition with the National School Lunch Program and/or the School Breakfast Program in food service areas during the meal periods.