



**An Action for Healthy Kids Report**

# **Parents' Views on School Wellness Practices**

National public opinion research jointly conducted by Action for Healthy Kids,  
Pursuant, Inc. and Knowledge Networks, September 2005

[www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org)





## **Parents' Views on School Wellness Practices**

### **Background**

Last year, the Federal Government enacted the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, which requires that all schools participating in the School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (which a majority of schools do) establish school Wellness Policies. This law recognizes the critical role that schools must play in helping to combat the epidemic of childhood obesity.

By the start of the next school year (2006-2007), all covered school districts must have a Wellness Policy in place. By law, these policies are required to address:

- Appropriate goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness
- Nutrition guidelines for all foods available during the school day, with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity
- Assurances that school meal guidelines are not less restrictive than federal requirements
- Plans for measuring the implementation of the school Wellness Policy

The legislation requires that school administrators, parents, students, school food service staff and community health professionals all participate in the development of Wellness Policies. In essence, the Federal Government has created the potential to engage the entire community in issues of children's nutrition and health.

Unfortunately, there is a real risk that this opportunity to have America's schools play a leadership role in improving our children's nutrition and physical activity may be missed. Currently, the federal mandate makes no provision for the funding necessary for schools to implement Wellness Policies, no provision of the funds necessary to evaluate the efficacy of Wellness Policies, and no sanctions for those school districts that fail to comply with the mandate.

### **How to improve the nutrition environment at school\***

***"Offer more healthy choices and less high sugar/sodium choices."***  
- CT elementary school parent

***"Offer a variety of nutritional foods. This would allow the students to make healthy choices, while enjoying their food."***  
- CA elementary school parent

***"Fewer fried and 'fast food' style offerings."***  
-TX high school parent

***"I don't think they should have vending machines open during school hours. They should not have snacks in the cafeteria line."***  
-CA high school parent

***"Stop serving pizza, French fries and meatball subs on a daily basis. Stop serving chicken nuggets/strips so often. Post the calories and fat content of each food item on the menu."***  
-AZ middle school parent

***\*Parents responses to survey questions***



Clearly, then, external audiences that have a vested interest in these issues need to play a significant role in both making sure that Wellness Policies are properly developed, and that Wellness Policies are given the resources necessary to be implemented. While multiple groups (e.g., corporations, foundations, community groups, and coalitions such as Action for Healthy Kids) must become involved in helping schools to fulfill this mandate, the most critical group of school-stakeholders that are needed for this effort are parents. Parents can have the greatest impact on changing the practices of our schools because they are the strongest advocates for America's children. As such, parents must be fully engaged in the effort to ensure that school districts are able to take full advantage of this unique opportunity for improvement. Parents need to be made aware of the problems of childhood obesity and the role that schools must play in providing solutions. Furthermore, parents must be given a central role in helping to assure that Wellness Policies are implemented by our schools.

In order to learn the views that parents currently have on these issues, as well as the changes parents believe are most needed in schools, Action for Healthy Kids conducted a national survey with parents. The aim of this survey was to better understand parents' beliefs surrounding the current wellness practices of their child's school, and to gauge parents' knowledge of the new mandate for local school Wellness Policies. With guidance from several partner organizations, Action for Healthy Kids surveyed parents with children in grades K-12 to:

- Discover what parents currently understand about wellness practices in their own children's schools
- Determine the level of parents' awareness of the new Federal mandate for schools to develop Wellness Policies by the 2006-2007 school year
- Learn what programs and practices parents think are most important to include in school Wellness Policies

### **How to get kids moving at school\***

***"I think it would be beneficial for physical education to be extended to a longer period of time than normal academic classes."***  
**-MA high school parent**

***"Have physical education class three times a week instead of one class a week."***  
**-NH elementary school parent**

***"Find other ways to discipline children besides having them sit out of recess or P.E. Sometimes one misbehaving child will keep the entire class out of recess."***  
**-TX elementary school parent**

***"I would like to see physical education mandatory for all grades every day!"***  
**-CT high school parent**

***\*Parents responses to survey questions***

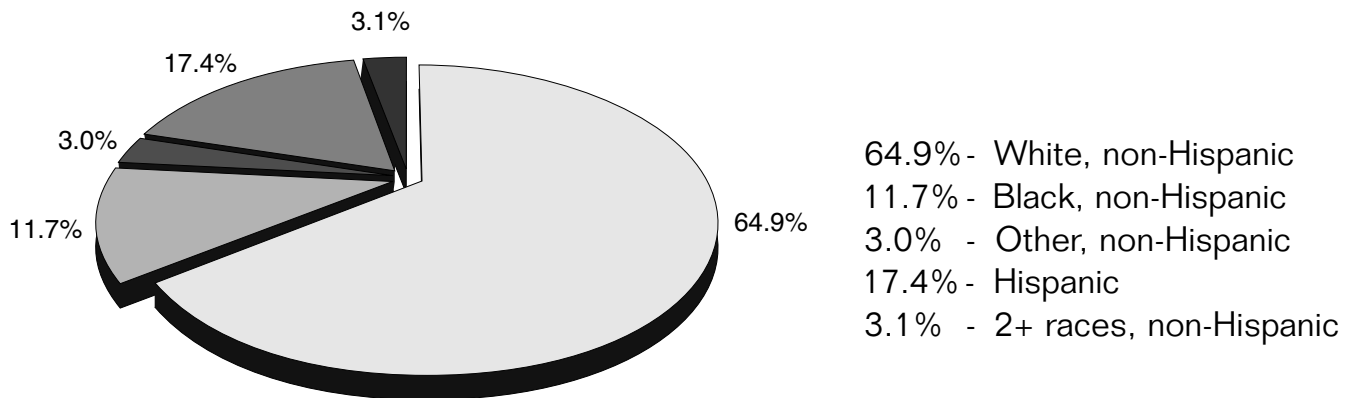


## Survey Methodology

In July 2005, a nationally representative sample of parents of non-homeschooled children in grades K-12 was recruited for an online survey. The randomly selected sample of U.S. households is part of Knowledge Networks' nationally representative Internet panel. Panel members were screened for having children in grades K-12 living in the household, of whom they were either a parent or legal guardian and most knowledgeable about the child's experiences at school. Survey respondents were 70% female, 30% male, 71% married, 17% divorced, 9% single (never married), 3% widowed, and 2% separated.

Interviews were completed with (n=638) parents, including (n=219) parents of younger children in grades K-5, (n=202) parents of middle school students in grades 6-8, and (n=217) parents of high school students in grades 9-12.<sup>1</sup> The statistical margin of error is +/- 4% for the base sample of all parents; it is larger for the sub samples: parents of elementary school students (+/-7%), parents of middle school students (+/-7%), and parents of high school students (+/-7%). The statistical margin of sampling error is just one form of error or bias that can affect survey results. Please note that for several of the open-ended survey questions, the percentages reported add up to more than 100%. This is due to several parents offering more than one response to the open-ended questions.

### Respondents' Race





## **Overall Survey Findings**

### **Current Wellness Practices Of Own Child's School**

Parents were asked to rate their child's school on various wellness practices in the areas of both nutrition and physical activity.

Fifty-percent of parents think their child's school has a nutrition/wellness policy, whereas 40% don't know if such a policy exists at their child's school. Significantly more parents with children in grades K-5 say that their child's school has this type of policy (64%) than parents of middle or high school students (39% and 43%, respectively).

### **Nutrition**

Parents were asked to rate their child's school for various components of nutrition using a scale of "excellent," "good," "fair," "poor," or "don't know."

Over one-half of parents rated their child's school as "good" or "excellent" on:

- Making breakfast available at school every day for all children (69%)
- Providing rewards, other than food (e.g., books, extra recess time, academic awards, etc.) for accomplishments (60%)
- Offering a variety of healthful foods and beverages that appeal to their child (53%)
- Providing all students nutrition education (54%)
- Encouraging children to consume healthful foods and beverages (52%)

About half of parents rated their child's school as "fair" or "poor" on:

- Providing parents nutrition information (58%)
- Allowing enough time to eat (48%)
- Providing high-quality, good tasting food in cafeteria lunches (48%)

Parents were then asked what the "top thing" is that they would like their child's school to do to improve nutrition. One-quarter of parents did not offer a response or didn't know, and 6% said no improvement was needed. Among the remaining 69% of parents, unaided responses fell into two major categories<sup>2</sup>:

- Offer and serve better/more healthy foods (44%); responses included:
  - Offer healthier, nutritional options
  - More fresh fruit and vegetables
  - Better tasting/appealing/hot food
  - Better selection/more variety
- Eliminate or limit unhealthy foods (17%); responses included:
  - Eliminate/limit junk food
  - Limit high fat/high carb/fast foods



## **Physical Activity**

Parents were asked to rate their child's school for various components of physical education and physical activity using a scale of "excellent," "good," "fair," "poor," or "don't know."

More than 60% of parents rated their child's school as "good" or "excellent" on:

- Adequate daily recess time (69%)
- Promotion of physical activity through various school-based activities (63%)
- Daily physical activity opportunities available for all students (62%)

Parents rated their child's school as "fair" or "poor" on:

- Educating about alternatives to sedentary activities (e.g., watching TV, playing videogames, computer time) at home (44%)
- After-school physical activity opportunities (e.g., after-school programs that include physical activity, intramural games, sports) (36%)

Parents were then asked what the "top thing" is that they would like their child's school to do to improve physical activity and physical education. About one in three did not answer or didn't know, and 10% said no changes were necessary. Among the 58% of parents who responded (unaided) to this question, many different suggestions were offered. Some of these included:

- Offer more after-school activities/intramural/extracurricular sports (21%)
- Offer more variety/activities/alternative physical activity (12%)
- Require/mandate "physical education" class daily/all year (11%)

### **Opportunities for Being Active at School\***

*"Specific targets for physical activity that each student is expected to achieve."*

*-CA middle school parent*

*"The policy should address the vision in which they plan to teach the children about nutrition and physical education and the benefits of being fit. They should also offer rewards (certificates, gift certificates to a sports store) in order to encourage kids to engage in physical activity."*

*-FL middle school parent*

*"Importance of physical activity. Alternatives to video games and TV."*

*-NJ high school parent*

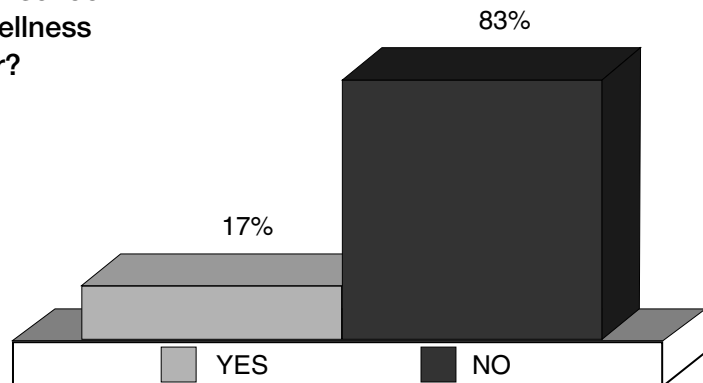
*\*Parents responses to survey questions*



## **Awareness of New Local School Wellness Policy Mandate**

A majority of parents surveyed (83%) are completely unaware of the Local School Wellness Policy mandate.

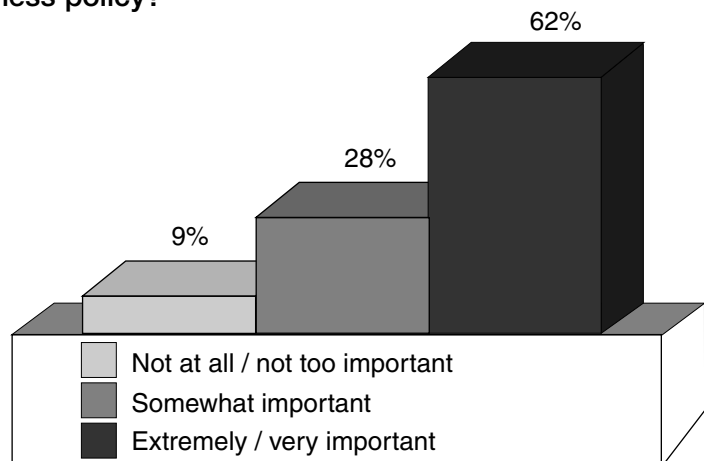
**Have you read, seen or heard anything about the new federal requirements that all school districts establish a Local School Wellness Policy by the 2006-2007 school year?**



## **Importance of Wellness Policies**

Sixty-two percent of parents believe that it is “very” or “extremely” important that schools have a Wellness Policy, while 28% feel that it is only “somewhat” important, and 9% think that it is “not too” or “not at all” important.

**How important is it to you personally that your child’s school have a nutrition/wellness policy?**





## **Features of a School Wellness Policy Suggested by Parents**

When parents were asked what should be included in a local school Wellness Policy (unaided), 40% of parents did not offer a response, while 5% felt that no improvements were necessary. Priorities for the remaining 55% of parents included four main areas<sup>3</sup>:

- Education on nutrition and healthy eating (23%)
  - Education on nutrition, health and diet
  - Education on the importance of eating healthy
  - Involving/educating parents on healthy eating
- Providing physical education and increased physical activity opportunities (21%)
  - Promoting exercise and physical activity at school
  - Specific improvements to the school's physical education program (e.g., hiring more inspiring teachers, increasing "fun" PE activities, etc.)
  - Increasing physical activity opportunities at school
- Offering healthy foods and beverages (14%)
  - Offering more nutritional foods and healthy snacks at school
  - Providing a well-balanced lunch
- Limiting unhealthy foods and beverages (8%)
  - Less junk food and unhealthy snacks at school
  - Eliminating soda machines
  - Eliminating vending machines

### **Making Good Food Available / Enough Time to Eat Lunch\***

***"Snack bars or lunch options that include more fruits, vegetables, yogurt, milk, and healthy food choices."  
-PA middle school parent***

***"Change the lunch menu to include more fresh and raw fruit and vegetables, and less fried and breaded food. Provide more time to eat, which is better for feeling full and snacking less."  
-MS elementary school parent***

***"Nutrition standards for what is available on campus, and sufficient time to eat so students do not have to gobble."  
-PA high school parent***

***\*Parents responses to survey questions***



## Components That Parents Think Should Be Required

A series of possible components of a local school Wellness Policy were rated by parents completing the survey. After rating the level of importance of each component, parents were asked to place a check next to any items they thought should be required as part of local school wellness policies. The chart below lists the percentage of parents, by child's grade level, who believe each component should be required.

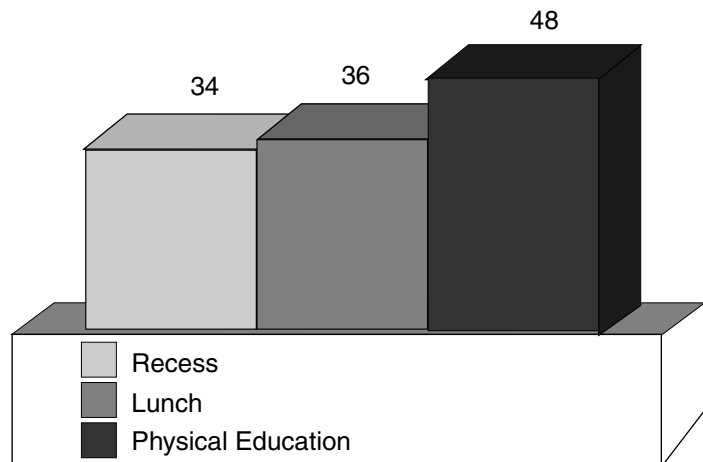
	<b>K-5th grade %</b>	<b>6th-8th grade %</b>	<b>9th-12th grade %</b>	<b>Total grade %</b>
A variety of opportunities for children to be physically active during the school day	82.8	72.5	78.7	78.1
Education and the promotion of physical activity opportunities	68.6	64.8	58.4	64.1
After-school programs that promote physical activity and healthy snacks	70.2	58.2	62.9	63.3
Breakfast offered at schools to all children on a daily basis	67.0	68.0	73.5	69.4
Daily promotion of healthy food choices in school meals	80.4	75.0	73.8	77.2
Information/education to parents on sound nutrition and the importance of physical activity	53.2	50.9	49.1	51.4
Nutrition education in all grades	73.6	74.2	72.8	74.4
Nutrition standards for all foods/beverages on the school campus	68.0	73.7	63.5	67.2
Physical activity integrated into classroom activities	64.4	44.8	46.8	53.8
Daily physical education for all students	76.8	76.5	76.2	76.8
Recess offered on a daily basis	90.6	67.9	55.0	74.4
Restricting the availability of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods on the school campus	69.7	75.4	67.3	69.9
School health council that includes parents, students, teachers, administrators and others	48.6	51.5	44.6	48.6



## Time Parents Would Like Allocated

Parents were asked to provide the number of minutes that should be devoted to lunch, physical education and recess on a typical school day (assuming a typical 7 hour day). In addition, they were asked the amount of time that should be allocated for nutrition education in a typical school week (5 days). On average, parents thought children should be exposed to nutrition education in the curriculum two days per week.

**Mean number of minutes parents believe should be devoted to recess, lunch, and physical education daily.**



## Discussion

The survey results reveal three critical findings. First, parents need better information about current wellness practices in their children's schools. As will be shown, a significant gap exists between what parents believe is happening, what they would like to happen, and what is actually happening in schools. Second, parents need to be informed about the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, its mandate for the creation of school Wellness Policies, and the mandate that parents (among other key school stakeholders) be involved from the beginning in designing these Wellness Policies. This law recognizes the critical role that schools must play in helping to combat the epidemic of childhood obesity. Moreover, the law recognizes the critical role that parents must play in developing Wellness Policies with schools. Thirdly, even though some parents may not be able to state unaided specifically what a Wellness Policy should include, a majority of parents are clear about the kind of wellness practices that should be included in school Wellness Policies.

These findings make it clear that national efforts must be undertaken which both encourage and support parental involvement with schools as Wellness Policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated in schools.

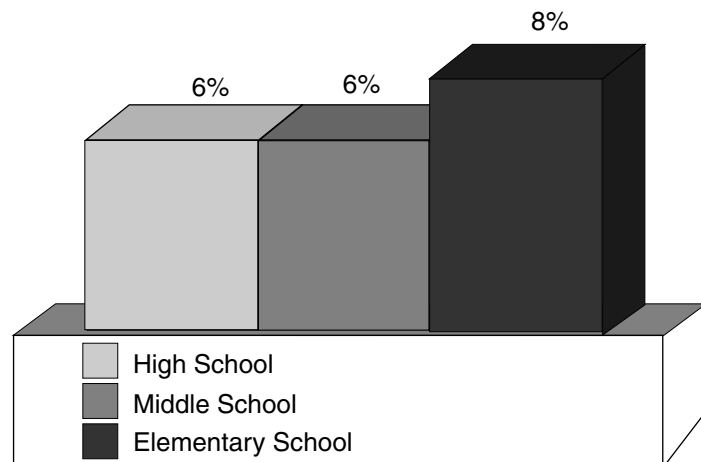


## Current School Wellness Practices

Although in the last three years there have been notable improvements in the development of wellness-oriented programs and practices at schools, data from the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) indicate that the majority of schools are not offering daily physical education; the majority of schools sell low nutrient foods in vending machines, snack lines, and school stores; and nutrition education has received minimal attention<sup>4</sup>. The results of this survey show that in addition to these facts, parents--the strongest advocacy group for the health of America's children--are suffering from a significant "disconnect" between what they think schools are doing, *and should be doing*, to help fight obesity and what schools are *actually* doing.

For example, 62% of surveyed parents rated their child's school as "excellent" or "good" on "making daily physical education available for all students." The reality in America's schools, however, is quite different, as only 5.8% to 8.0% of schools nationally (depending upon grade level) provide students with daily physical education or its equivalent; [defined as 150 minutes/week in elementary schools and 225 minutes in middle/high schools.<sup>5</sup>] Parents that were surveyed would like physical education to be taught for an average of 48 minutes each day.

### Percent of students that attend a daily physical education class



Source: Centers for Disease Control, 2000 SHPPS<sup>5</sup>

Similar patterns emerged when parents were asked about nutrition education. More than half of parents surveyed rated their child's school as "excellent" or "good" on providing nutrition education for all students. Experts in nutrition education note that 15 hours are needed to bring about change in knowledge and 50 hours are required for changes in attitudes and behaviors<sup>6</sup>. Yet, the reality is that the CDC found that the typical school health curriculum includes an average of only 5 hours *per school year* devoted to nutrition education<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, it is common for only select grades to be exposed to nutrition education. Our survey found that the majority of parents want to see nutrition education for all grades and that all children are exposed to nutrition education in the curriculum an average of two days each week.



Parents would also like lunch periods lengthened. CDC data indicates that on average, once a child is seated; there is only 23 minutes to eat lunch. Twenty percent of schools give students less than 20 minutes for lunch and parents would like children to have 36 minutes on average.<sup>8</sup>

The majority of parents (70%) want their children to have less exposure to high-calorie, low nutrient foods and beverages at schools. In direct contrast to parents' desired practice, a recent report to Congress from the Government Accounting Office estimated that 90% of schools sold these items in either vending, a la carte, or school stores during the 2003-2004 school year. Data indicates that students have increased access to these lower nutrient foods and beverages as they progressed from elementary school to middle school to high school. And, in a la carte items, the amount sold and the variety of products have increased in more than two-thirds of high schools, in at least half of middle schools and nearly one-third of all elementary schools. In addition, 4 out of 10 schools allow fund-raising with items like candy and baked goods.

### **Education about Nutrition and Physical Activity\***

*“Educate the students about the importance of nutrition and exercise for both their minds and bodies.”*

*-NC high school parent*

*“Nutrition guides / education in the food lines about what is on the day’s menu.”*

*-IN elementary school parent*

*“Overall nutrition and fitness education...educate them on nutrition so they make smart choices when it comes to food.”*

*-NY middle school parent*

*\*Parents responses to survey questions*



## **Mandate for Local School Wellness Policy**

The survey findings indicate that parents support the need to improve school wellness practices. Although the majority of parents (83%) are unaware of the law mandating school Wellness Policies, most felt that it is important that their child's school have one.

When asked in an unaided manner what a Wellness Policy should include, 40% of parents did not offer a response. However, those that did respond noted four main areas to include in a school's Wellness Policy:

- Nutrition education
- Physical education and physical activity
- Increased access to healthful foods and beverages
- Limiting unhealthy food options

A majority of parents surveyed indicated that these elements are not only important to include in a Wellness Policy, but also that these elements should be required.

In fact, the majority of parents felt there should be several different requirements in Wellness Policies to ensure better nutrition for students. These include having daily breakfast available, promoting healthy food choices in school meals each day, applying nutrient standards for all foods on campus, providing nutrition education for all grades, and limiting the availability of high-calorie, low nutrient foods on campus. To help address fitness needs, a majority of parents would like the following to be required: daily recess, after-school programs that promote healthy snacks and physical activity, daily physical education for all students, and a variety of opportunities for children to be active during the school day.



## **Recommendations**

It is heartening to find that the wellness practices that parents want to see included in school Wellness Policies mirror the recommendations from the Surgeon General's report on preventing obesity. Action for Healthy Kids is a nonprofit organization that was created in response to the Surgeon General's "Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity." Action for Healthy Kids' nationwide initiative is committed to pursuing actions that will assist schools in their efforts to provide a healthful environment for students. As a result of this study, Action for Healthy Kids will work with our partner organizations to help:

- Inform parents and generate awareness about the mandate for Wellness Policies and areas to be addressed by these policies
- Foster parental involvement in the development and implementation of Wellness Policies by working with Action for Healthy Kids State Teams
- Provide resources and help Action for Healthy Kids State Teams work with districts and schools on the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluating of Wellness Policies
- Identify and disseminate model approaches to wellness practices and provide resources for schools as they develop Wellness Policies and practices that will promote better nutrition and more physical activity for the students

More work is needed. The results of this survey indicate a critical need to close the gap that exists between parents' perceptions of the efforts America's schools are making to fight the epidemic of childhood obesity and the reality in schools today. It is vital that parents are informed about the federal mandate that not only requires schools to develop Wellness Policies but also calls for parental involvement in their formation, implementation and evaluation. It will be up to stakeholders with a vested interest in both parents and schools to make the most of this opportunity to improve the health of our nation's children.



## **References**

1. All data included in this summary is weighted to be nationally representative of the current population characteristics of U.S. households.
2. Responses with less than 5% of total sample are not shown here.
3. Responses with less than 5% of total sample are not shown here.
4. Wechsler H., Brener N., Kruester S., Miller C. Food Service and Foods and Beverages Available at School: Results from the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2000. J School Health 2001 Vol 71(No.7):313-324.
5. Burgeson C., Wechsler W., Brener N., Young J., Spain C. Physical Education and Activity: Results from the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2000. J School Health 2001 Vol 71(No.7):279-293.
6. National Center for Education Statistics. Nutrition Education in Public Elementary School Classrooms, K-5. US Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, February 2000.
7. Wechsler H., Brener N., Kruester S., Miller C. Food Service and Foods and Beverages Available at School: Results from the School Health Policies and Programs Study 2000. J School Health 2001 Vol 71(No.7):313-324
8. Ibid
9. Government Accounting Office, Report to Congressional Requesters. School Meal Program: Competitive foods are widely available and generate substantial revenues for schools August 2005 (GAO-05-563)