


GAO
 Accountability-Integrity-Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-506](#), a report to
Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent trends in children's health and eating habits are alarming. Over 15 percent of children are overweight—double the rate in 1980. Children's diets are high in fat but low in fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods. The National School Lunch Program has had a continuing role in providing students with nutritious meals. However, serving the meals is only the first step. Students must choose to eat the nutritious food and limit the less healthful choices. GAO was asked to report on the extent to which school lunches, nationwide, were meeting nutrition standards, and schools were encouraging healthy eating, what barriers selected schools faced in accomplishing this, and what innovative steps they had taken to overcome the barriers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretaries of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Education work together to identify specific strategies to help schools promote nutrition education while meeting the demands of state academic standards and to encourage each state to identify a focal point to promote collaborative efforts that would further develop nutrition education activities for schools.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-506.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David D. Bellis at (415) 904-2272.

SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Efforts Needed to Improve Nutrition and Encourage Healthy Eating

What GAO Found

Schools are moving toward meeting school lunch nutrition requirements, but more improvements are needed. According to national studies, lunches meet requirements for nutrients such as protein, vitamins, calcium, and iron, but do not meet the required 30 percent limit for calories from fat. Also, efforts to encourage healthy eating could be increased. Students may need more exposure to nutrition education to effect positive changes in their behavior, and most students have access to foods of little nutritional value, such as soft drinks and candy, at school.

In schools we visited, barriers to providing nutritious meals and encouraging healthy eating included budget pressures and competing time demands. Regarding providing nutritious food, officials said when they introduce healthier foods, they take the risk that students will buy fewer school lunches resulting in loss of needed revenue. Regarding encouraging healthy eating, officials said the focus on meeting state academic standards limited time to teach nutrition. Also, schools paid for special activities or other items not covered in the school's budget with profits from vending machines and snack bar sales.

Schools had taken a variety of innovative steps to overcome barriers. With respect to providing nutritious food, while minimizing the risk students might reject healthier choices, schools modified recipes to lower the fat content of popular foods such as pizza and conducted taste tests before adding healthier choices. To encourage healthy eating, schools found time to teach nutrition by integrating nutrition lessons into reading and math classes, and some established school food policies to restrict unhealthy choices. Some schools enlisted help from parents, community organizations, and businesses. Officials noted that overcoming barriers required strong and persevering leadership.

Some Schools Encourage Healthy Eating



Source: GAO.