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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-05-563, a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent increases in child obesity have sparked concerns about competitive foods—foods sold to students at school that are not part of federally reimbursable school meals. The nutritional value of these foods is largely unregulated, and students can often purchase these foods in addition to or instead of school meals. In our April 2004 report on competitive foods (GAO-04-673), we reported that several states had enacted competitive food policies that were more restrictive than federal regulations. However, these policies differed widely in the type and extent of restrictions. In addition, it was unclear how and to what extent states were monitoring compliance with these policies. GAO was also asked to provide a national picture of competitive foods in schools, as well as strategies that districts and schools themselves are taking to limit the availability of less nutritious competitive foods. This report provides information from two nationally representative surveys about the prevalence of competitive foods in schools, competitive foods restrictions and groups involved in their sale, and the amounts and uses of revenue generated from the sale of competitive foods. It also provides information about strategies schools have used to limit the availability of less nutritious competitive foods, based on visits to a total of six school districts in California, Connecticut, Mississippi, Missouri, and South Carolina.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-563.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David Bellis at (415) 904-2272 or bellisd@gao.gov.

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Competitive Foods Are Widely Available and Generate Substantial Revenues for Schools

What GAO Found

Nearly 9 out of 10 schools sold competitive foods to students in school year 2003-2004, and the availability of competitive foods sold in middle schools and through a la carte lines has increased over the last 5 years. Schools often sold these foods in or near the cafeteria and during lunch, and the competitive foods available ranged from nutritious items such as fruit and milk to less nutritious items such as soda and candy. High and middle schools were more likely to sell competitive foods than elementary schools.

Many different people made decisions about competitive food sales, but no one person commonly had responsibility for all sales in a school. In a majority of schools, district officials made competitive food policies, while school food authority directors and principals made decisions about specific sales. Other groups, such as student clubs and booster groups, also made competitive food decisions through their direct involvement in sales.

Many schools, particularly high schools and middle schools, generated substantial revenues through competitive food sales in 2003-2004. Specifically, the nearly 30 percent of high schools generating the most revenue from these sales raised more than \$125,000 per school. Food services, responsible for providing federal school meals, generally spent the revenue they generated through a la carte sales on food service operations. Other school groups often used revenues for student activities.

The six school districts visited all recently took steps to substitute healthy items for less nutritious competitive foods. In each district, committed individuals took actions to initiate and lead change while also involving those affected. However, districts faced several barriers to change, including opposition due to concerns about revenue losses. In the districts visited, the effects of changes on revenues were often unclear because of limited data.

A Majority of Schools Sell Competitive Foods to Students through Vending Machines



Source: GAO.