Establishing Healthy Snacks in Schools Policy

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Smart Snacks Nutrition Standard went into effect at the beginning of this school year, requiring foods and drinks sold in school vending machines and a la carte lines to be healthier. Nevada could have simply followed the national standards, but advocates there went a step further, so the “Silver State” has established the gold standard when it comes to healthy school snack policies.

Under the state’s new policy, not only must all items sold to Nevada students in school during the school day meet the federal nutrition standard, all marketing in the schools must also be consistent with the standard. That means no posters, coupons or fundraising efforts promoting unhealthy beverages, candy, or high-fat pizza can appear in the schools.

“We worked to create a policy that not only helped schools meet the new federal standards but took it one step further not to allow junk-food marketing,” says Ben Schmauss, the American Heart Association’s government relations director in Nevada. The Nevada AHA, with technical assistance from the Voices for Healthy Kids, played a supportive leadership role in the development and implementation of the policy.

Health advocates and the Nevada Department of Agriculture, which adopted the standard as part of its school wellness policy, see the elimination of junk-food marketing in the schools as a natural fit with the national standard. Eliminating access to and marketing of junk foods in school ensures students won’t bombarded with incentives for unhealthy products, and supports what parents try to do in the home.

Consistent, healthier messaging throughout the school day is important for all children and particularly crucial for those who live in lower socio-economic neighborhoods with greater frequency of junk food marketing.

Dr. Rebecca Scherr, pediatric gastroenterologist for University of Nevada School of Medicine and child health advocate, notes that schools get the importance of healthy options: they often go to great lengths to make sure that students eat healthy breakfasts and healthy snacks on testing days.

“If teachers and principals recognize that healthy snacks and physical activity help kids brains work better for testing, how about the other 179 learning days?” she asks.

The new policy is designed to allow schools and school districts to go even further if they want. According to Donnell Barton, the Nevada Department of Agriculture’s administrator for the Food and Nutrition Division, the policy sets a statewide minimum, creating consistency and allowing schools to implement policies that may be stricter.

Some school officials have expressed concern that the new policy will affect the profitability of fundraising programs for school sports, trips and equipment purchases. Barton’s office is helping schools by providing an online list of available healthy fundraising items.

“You can still fundraise without having to use junk food to do it,” says Schmauss.

Thus far, Nevada health advocates are hearing many positive anecdotes of parents who are happy with the new standard because it supports what they’re doing to provide healthy foods at home and educate their children on the importance of good nutrition.

“The policy will have an impact on the health of students and promote healthier behaviors … it’s our hope they will carry it with them for life,” says Barton.

Dr. Scherr’s has simple advice to health advocates in other states who want to reach for the new bar set by Nevada.

“Be bold! The health of children and their ability to learn go together. Schools don’t need to enable unhealthy choices that diminish the ability of our students to learn and lead healthy lives. The science is with us. We have a massive epidemic on our hands—we need to take action and do what we can to provide an opportunity for this generation to live healthy lives and achieve. This policy is one of the multifaceted efforts that can have an essential impact on addressing that problem.”