

news

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VOTERS OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT STRONGER SCHOOL FOOD STANDARDS, NEW POLL FINDS

Results show strong, bipartisan support for programs to help make school foods healthier, safer

WASHINGTON – More than three out of four American voters—78 percent—believe that schools should be required to meet higher nutrition standards for all foods they serve or sell to students, and 61 percent support providing schools with more funding to meet those standards, according to a new poll conducted by the bipartisan team of Hart Research and American Viewpoint and commissioned by the *Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project*.

The Project is a new initiative, recently launched by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to support efforts to improve the food served in America's schools—from cafeteria meals to vending machine snacks. It aims to make school foods healthier and safer from contamination, using strategies informed by the most recent science-based recommendations.

More than 23 million American children and adolescents—nearly one in three—are overweight or obese, which places them at increased risk for long-term health problems such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Results from the new poll show that half of voters are “very concerned” about the state of children’s health.

“Providing children with nutritious food can help them avoid obesity and long-term health risks, and properly handling that food reduces the threat of foodborne illnesses,” said Erik D. Olson, director of the Kids’ Safe and Healthful Foods Project and deputy director of food programs for the Pew Health Group, which is the health and consumer-product safety arm of The Pew Charitable Trusts. “We must provide children with the safe and healthy meals they need to focus in the classroom and succeed.”

Experts say school meals play a key role in young people’s health, as many kids consume more than half of their daily calories at school. According to government data, more than half of children (56 percent) eat at least one school-provided meal every day, and many rely on their school cafeteria for both breakfast and lunch. Yet the current nutrition standards for these meals were last updated more than 15 years ago and do not reflect recent nutrition science, changes in children’s eating habits or current public health concerns.



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has proposed adding more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and nonfat milk to school meals, while limiting calories and reducing the amount of unhealthy fats and sodium. The agency is seeking public comments on the proposed standards through April 13, 2011. To help schools meet these standards, the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010* authorizes increases in funding for school meals for the first time in more than 30 years.

“These new nutrition standards will benefit all students, and will be especially important for children at higher risk for obesity, many of whom rely on free and reduced-price school meals,” said James S. Marks, senior vice president and director of the Health Group of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “If we can act swiftly and make sure these standards are rigorous, it will be an important step towards reversing the childhood obesity epidemic.”

The Kids’ Safe and Healthful Foods Project will provide nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations to help ensure that:

- USDA adopts science-based nutrition standards for all foods and beverages served and sold in schools;
- Schools have the resources they need to train cafeteria employees and replace outdated and broken kitchen equipment; and
- USDA develops and implements rigorous school food safety policies.

The project will submit expert recommendations to the USDA as it finalizes its proposed nutrition standards. It also has begun to work with key partners to engage parents, caregivers, nutritionists, researchers and advocates who support efforts to improve school foods.

Further results from the poll released today show that voters support many of the goals of the Project:

- A substantial majority of voters—61 percent—support an increase in school nutrition program funding of 1 percent annually, or about \$135 million. Forty-three percent are strongly in favor.
 - Support is strong among adults who do not have school-aged children and also among parents whose children are in school.
 - Seventy-six percent of self-identified Democrats support increased funding, as do 60 percent of self-identified Independents and 43 percent of self-identified Republicans.
- Eighty-one percent of voters favor helping schools pay for more nutritious food, such as fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Seventy percent of voters support providing school cafeteria workers with more training to help them cook safe and healthier meals. Fifty-nine percent favor helping schools pay for new cafeteria equipment that will help workers prepare healthier meals.
- Seventy-eight percent of voters say schools should be required to make all foods served and sold in cafeteria lunch lines meet higher nutrition standards. Seventy-seven percent of voters say that candy/soda/chips/etc. in school vending machines should be replaced with water/juice/healthy snacks/etc.

Poll results come from a national survey of 1,007 registered voters conducted Dec. 8–15, 2010, by American Viewpoint (R) and Hart Research Associates (D). Respondents were contacted by telephone, including 150 who were interviewed via cell phone. The results of the poll are statistically representative of the opinions of voters nationwide and carry a margin of error of ± 3.1 percentage points.

To learn how to get involved in this effort, provide comments on the USDA's proposed changes or access a copy of the poll findings, visit www.HealthySchoolFoodsNow.org.

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About The Pew Charitable Trusts

[The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) is driven by the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. Pew applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public and stimulate civic life. We partner with a diverse range of donors, public and private organizations and concerned citizens who share our commitment to fact-based solutions and goal-driven investments to improve society.

Based on research and critical analysis, the [Pew Health Group](#) seeks to improve the health and well-being of all Americans through policy changes that reduce potentially dangerous health risks in consumer, medical and food products and services.

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. In 2007, the Foundation committed \$500 million toward its goal of reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015. This is the largest commitment any foundation has made to the issue.

For more than 35 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org.