

# Combating obesity through national school food policies across Europe

07 October 2014

Schools are regarded as a promising intervention target to counteract the increase of childhood obesity levels. In this context, the European Commission's [Joint Research Centre \(JRC\)](#) published a report this summer on the assessment of nutrition-related content of national school food policies in the 28 EU Member States, as well as Norway and Switzerland. The main finding was that all of these countries have a school food policy of some sort in place, either mandatory or voluntary. The report aims to inform public health policy makers, educators and researchers about the current European landscape of school food policies, highlighting various options intended to promote healthier school food environments.

According to the JRC survey, all 30 countries have school food policies in place, with 15 countries having mandatory regulations and 15 countries providing voluntary guidance on the food provided in schools. The policies vary from defined lists of foods that are allowed or prohibited for sale on school premises, to extensive guidelines or standards such as school menu planning, procurement of catering services or marketing restrictions.

Around two thirds of school food policies across Europe are established as separate, whereas some are embedded in other policies, mainly on obesity and education. Lunch and snacks are the most commonly addressed mealtimes, followed by breakfast and dinner; some school food policies apply to all food and drink available on school premises.

Over 90% of school food policies across Europe define or guide school-meal composition at the level of individual foods and food groups – for example, non-meat products. Three quarters of policies provide guidance on age-appropriate portion sizes; two thirds provide nutrient-based standards for lunch; and about half provide nutrient-based standards for mealtimes other than lunch. About half of school food policies across Europe take into account catering practices, staff training, and dining spaces and facilities.

Among the food-based standards specified for lunch and other mealtimes, the restriction of certain beverages, mainly soft drinks, features prominently. Most school food policies also give guidance on the provision of fruits, vegetables and fresh drinking water throughout the day. Restriction in the use of salt, as well as restrictions in the availability of sweet treats, fried, deep-fried and processed food products are covered in many of the policies.

Where guidance on the frequency of providing certain foods or food groups for lunch is given, dairy products are mentioned most often, followed by non-meat and non-dairy protein sources, oily fish and red meat. Several policies recommend choosing low-fat products and modes of food preparation, sometimes specifying the type of oil or fat that should not be used.

The report highlights a large variation between school food policies in how they are phrased and the level of detail provided. For example, whereas some countries simply request that fruits and vegetables be served daily, or a certain number of times per week, others specify amounts and how they should be

integrated, such as in lunch menus.

Standards for energy and nutrients are cited less frequently in school food policies, but are likely to have informed most food-based standards. Where nutrient standards are included, energy and fat content of foods or meals are specified most often, followed by protein and sugar. Some school-food policies also provide standards for micronutrients such as iron or calcium, mainly for lunch. When examining the varying policies employed by different countries, the authors determined that, overall, governments appear more concerned with excess calorie consumption from fat, rather than insufficient intake of vitamins and minerals.

Guidance or restrictions on vending machines in schools vary considerably, with some countries recommending balanced offers; while others outright ban vending machines on school premises. Restrictions relating to food marketing also vary considerably between countries.

A shortcoming highlighted in the report was that little more than half of all school food policies specify outcome measures, making it difficult to evaluate if and what impact they have.

For further information please see:

[Storcksdieck genannt Bonsmann S, et al. \(2014\). Mapping of National School Food Policies across the EU28 plus Norway and Switzerland. JRC Science and Policy Reports. European Union, Luxembourg.](#)