

# Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research  
Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

## ISSUE BRIEF

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## How to Achieve Healthier School Environments for Latino Kids

### Introduction

Healthy school environments are paramount for the proper development of Latino kids, given the rising percentage of Latino students enrolled in public schools and their high rates of obesity.

How can we ensure healthy schools will be the norm for Latinos?

Implementing and enforcing stronger nutrition standards for snack foods and beverages will help all students access to healthier snacks at school, which may positively influence body mass index (BMI) trends for all populations, especially those at greatest risk of being overweight or obese.

Because Latino students engage in less physical activity than their peers in school (and after and to-and-from school), implementing programs that reduce barriers may increase activity opportunities for Latino kids.

Supporting nutrition and physical activity in schools builds a culture of health where everyone is empowered to live the healthiest lives they can.

### The Evidence

#### The percentage of Latino students is rising.

- The percentage of Latino students enrolled in U.S. public schools increased from 17% of all students in 2001 to 24% of students in 2011.
- It is projected to rise to 30% of students by 2023.

#### Latino students are widely exposed to unhealthy foods and drinks at and around school.

- Latinos have greater access than white or black students to snacks and drinks sold in school à la carte lines, vending machines, stores, snack bars, and other venues that compete with the standard school meal. These snacks have historically been high in fat, calories, sugar and/or salt, though healthier national standards are now in place.
- Latino students were at least twice as likely as white students to buy snacks (i.e., chips, candy bars) and sugary drinks from a vending machine when available, according to multiple studies.
- Latino high-school students consumed 47 calories more during the school day from low-nutrient, energy-dense foods than their white peers, a study found.



#### ABOUT THIS ISSUE BRIEF

This issue brief is based on a research review prepared by Erin Surette Dembeck, P.A., Carolyn Beam, Ph.D., Beam Medical Communications, Jennifer Swanson, M.E., JS Medical Communications LLC, and Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., and Kipling J. Gallion, M.A., University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

The full research review, which includes citations, is available at <http://bit.ly/SaludSchools>.

For more information on Salud America!, visit <http://bit.ly/SaludAmerica>.



- Latino students were more likely to attend schools whose surrounding food environments included convenience stores, fast-food restaurants, snack stores or liquor stores, a national study found. When school proximity to fast food increased, so did Latino student body mass index (BMI).
- Latino-majority schools tend to have weaker policies regarding school snacks and drinks, and may be less likely to implement nutritional guidelines.

**School policies that reduce access to snacks and drinks are likely to reduce Latino students' consumption of unhealthy items during the school day, and positively impact student weight trends.**

- Beginning in the 2014-15 school year, schools were required to comply with updated nutrition standards for school snack foods and beverages—the first update in more than 30 years.
- After California adopted strict nutrition standards for school snacks in 2007, the availability and consumption of sugary drinks, chips, candy, etc., decreased.
- After the rules went into effect in California, a majority-Latino student population reported drinking more water. Another majority-Latino student population consumed less fat, sugar, and an average of 158 fewer calories per day than students in states with no such rules.
- A group of Boston public schools (39% Latino) banned sugary drinks. Students reported a significant decrease in daily sugary drink intake in and out of school, from 1.71 to 1.38 daily servings over two years.
- For Latino middle-school students, the lack of sugary drinks in schools was associated with significantly reduced odds of overweight/obesity.

**Latino kids are less likely to meet physical activity recommendations (at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a day) and are more likely to engage in sedentary behaviors than white kids.**

- Sedentary Latino parents had kids who also tended to be sedentary.
- Majority-minority schools tend to offer few programs and access to facilities for physical activity.
- Latino-majority elementary schools were less likely than white-majority schools to offer 20 minutes of recess daily, or physical education for at least 150 minutes a week.
- Even in states that have active play policies, schools face implementation challenges due to competing priorities and lack of resources, facilities, or policy knowledge.
- Latinos kids had the lowest participation in organized sports or afterschool programs than all other kids.
- Many majority-minority schools are located in urban, high-vehicle-traffic areas that are less conducive to walking and biking to school.

**Increasing opportunities for physical activity in school, after school, and to and from school can increase overall activity and improve obesity-related outcomes among Latino kids.**

- Studies show that schools can help increase physical activity and promote healthy behaviors in Latino kids by providing structured physical activity programs. For instance, a school-based intervention for Latina middle-school girls reduced sedentary behavior and increased motivation to engage in regular exercise; and a study of fifth-graders (39% Latino) found a 115% increase in physical activity on days with a 30-minute P.E. class, 20-minute lunch recess, and extra 10-minute recess, compared to days with just one of the three.
- Latino youth who participate in afterschool fitness programs were 10% more likely to be physically fit two years later than those who didn't participate. For example: Programs that engage multiple sectors of the

community and incorporate culturally relevant activities and healthy-living messages can increase Latino kids' physical activity; a school-based afterschool soccer and literacy program on school grounds increased overweight kids' physical activity by 3.4 minutes after school and 18.5 minutes on Saturdays.

- Latino students living along Safe Routes to School improvement projects reported significant increases in walking and biking to school, and walking school buses have shown some success increasing active commutes for Latino students, studies show.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

### Conclusions

- Latino students are a growing population.
- Their risk of being overweight or obese is heightened by widespread access to unhealthy foods and drinks at school, and less participation in physical activity in school, after school, and to and from school.
- Latino students would especially benefit from specific nutrition standards for school snacks and drinks; such strong policies may positively influence BMI trends in this vulnerable population.
- Structured school-based programs that incorporate culturally relevant messages and activities have demonstrated some success in increasing physical activity among Latino kids, though many majority Latino schools are still not compliant with physical activity requirements.
- Encouraging participation in and creating opportunities for participation in school-based sports and afterschool fitness programs are also important, as is developing safer routes for students to walk and bike to and from school.

### Policy Implications

- Decision-makers should prioritize helping schools in Latino communities effectively implement federal nutrition standards, such as the final standards for school snacks and the proposed improvements to nutrition standards for meals provided through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which covers Head Start programs and after-school programs.
- Public health leaders should consider initiatives (e.g., nutrition education programs) that consider schools' surrounding food environments and familiar cultural factors, such as convenience stores and mobile food vendors, which may be especially beneficial in Latino communities.
- School administrators should develop structured programs to increase Latino kids' physical activity. In addition, they should consider less structured activities (i.e., incorporating in-class activity breaks, enhancing schoolyards, providing equipment, etc.), which have promise to increase kids' physical activity levels.
- Health departments, schools and communities should collaborate on culturally relevant after-school programs or activities to help Latino kids meet the federal standard of 60 minutes of daily physical activity.