

Unequal implementation of the *Escuelas Saludables* regulations: A study of 3 middle-school cafeterias in Mazatlan, Sinaloa, Mexico

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Introduction/background

- Mexico ranks among the highest countries globally in prevalence of overweight and obesity (but at a much lower GDP per capita than its highly overweight peers).
 - The growth of overweight and obesity had been astonishingly rapid: In 1988, fewer than one-third of all adults in Mexico were overweight, and obesity-related diseases such as diabetes were rare. By 2006, incidence of overweight and obesity (BMI \geq 25) in adult women in Mexico was over 71 percent.
 - Obesity and diet-related chronic diseases, particularly diabetes, are now a public health crisis in Mexico.
- In January 2011 the Mexican government initiated new regulations to limit the sale of high-calorie snacks and promote healthier options in school canteens.
- Schools are prohibited from selling:
 - *Refrescos* (soft drinks)
 - Packaged chips
 - Specified high-calorie candies, cookies & sweet or salty snacks
 - Other snacks permitted only in limited portion sizes
- Schools are required to make available:
 - Plain water
 - Servings of fruits and vegetables
- Schools must modify offerings:
 - Bread & other grain products must use whole grains
 - Cheeses and meats must be lower in fat
 - Preparations must use less oil & fat
- “The foods and beverages supplied for consumption on the campuses of basic education should reflect the principles of proper diet” (Secretaría de Salud, Gobierno Federal de México, 2010).



Objectives

- Examine the implementation of the new school food regulations in middle schools in upper, middle, and low socioeconomic status (SES) communities (as part of a larger ethnographic study) in the Mazatlan metropolitan area
- Investigate community and stakeholder reactions to the new policy
- Identify facilitators and obstacles to implementation

Methods

- Select and recruit for participation middle schools that represent low, middle, and upper SES communities
- Visit school sites and conduct interviews with cafeteria managers and workers to study the various phases of reform (or lack thereof) in the 3 selected schools as well as other schools
- Observe students using the school canteen facilities
- Interview parents, students, and local business owners to examine attitudes about and perceptions of the policy
- Interview authorities involved in implementation and other knowledgeable actors to investigate factors that facilitate or impede compliance
- Interview local business owners

Findings

- The upper-SES school (“Sagrado Corazon”), an exclusive private school, had implemented—and exceeded—all the reforms
- The middle-SES school (“Reyes”), the most competitive public middle school in the city, had implemented many of the currently obligatory reforms
- The low-SES school (“Altamirano”), one of the poorest-performing middle schools in the city, had implemented none of the reforms

- *In the upper-SES school:*
 - Parents strongly support limiting food and beverage sales to only healthy options
 - Students also support the policies and say they are accustomed to them
 - Students have disposable income to purchase more expensive offerings
 - Students cannot leave campus to purchase snacks in the surrounding neighborhood
 - Canteen is operated directly by the school and staffed by school employees
 - Canteen manager is not pressured by profit motive
 - Accounting of canteen purchases and sales is rigorous
 - Income generated by canteen sales plays a very small role in school finances
 - The school’s status as a “healthy school” is used as a selling point to attract high-tuition-paying parents

- *In the middle-SES school:*
 - Parents generally support the new policies
 - Most students support the policies and say they have become used to them
 - Most students have disposable income to purchase more expensive offerings
 - Students cannot leave campus to purchase snacks elsewhere
 - Food stalls are operated by independent contractors who pay a monthly fee for the right to operate their businesses in the school
 - Student body/campus characteristics make it possible to follow the regulations and still be profitable
 - Financial accounting of canteen purchases and sales is not transparent

- Income generated by canteen sales plays a notable role in school's (and director's) finances
- Internecine politics played a role in pressuring the school's director to adopt the reforms

➤ *In the low-SES school:*

- Most parents and students uninformed or ambivalent about the new policies
- Most students do not have disposable income to purchase more expensive offerings
- Students can leave campus to purchase snacks elsewhere
- Food stalls are operated by independent contractors who pay a monthly fee for the right to operate their businesses in the school
- Student body/campus characteristics make it difficult to follow the regulations and still be profitable
- Financial accounting of canteen purchases and sales are not transparent
- Income generated by canteen sales plays an important role in school's (and director's) finances
- Director and canteen workers collude to hide banned items before inspections

➤ Dept. of Ed. staff responsible for policy implementation report:

- Insufficient resources for training, inspection, and follow up
- Lack of authority to inspect schools without advance notice or to enact incentives for compliance and penalties for noncompliance
- Inadequate focus on the canteen food sales portion of the broader *Escuela y Salud* program
- "The rules are technically obligatory, but voluntary in practice"

Discussion/Recommendations

- Greater authority (and resources) to implement policy at Dept. of Ed.
- Regulation of school canteen contractor rents; requirement of transparency of canteen income paid to school directors and committees
- Subsidy to school canteens in low-income communities to provide healthy options at a lower price
- Secure campuses
- Incentives to schools to complete and maintain the reforms
- Penalties for noncompliance
- Continuing nutrition education programs for students, parents, and teachers, particularly in low-income communities
- Broader participation: Engage students and parents in selecting food offerings that meet the guidelines

References

Secretaría de Salud, Gobierno Federal de México (2010). "Manual para la preparación e higiene de alimentos y bebidas de consumo escolar de los planteles de educación básica" (author's translation)