

Role of the Child Nutrition Commodity Program in creating healthy school meals: What are the policy opportunities?

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Funding and research team

- **Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Healthy Eating Research Program**
 - California Food Policy Advocates
 - Samuels & Associates



Purpose of the study

○ Purpose:

- To examine the nutrition quality of the foods available by Child Nutrition Commodity Food Program
- To understand how the program operates and how school districts make use of the program
- To examine how the program impacts compliance with USDA school meal standards and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.



Research questions

1. What is the nutrition profile of the individual food items offered by USDA through the California Department of Education (CDE) in the child nutrition commodity food program?
2. What is the nutrition profile of the mix of commodity foods ordered by California school districts?
3. What state and federal level policy recommendations emerge from the findings?
4. Does the commodity food program support improvements in the school meal program aligned with obesity prevention strategies?



Methodology

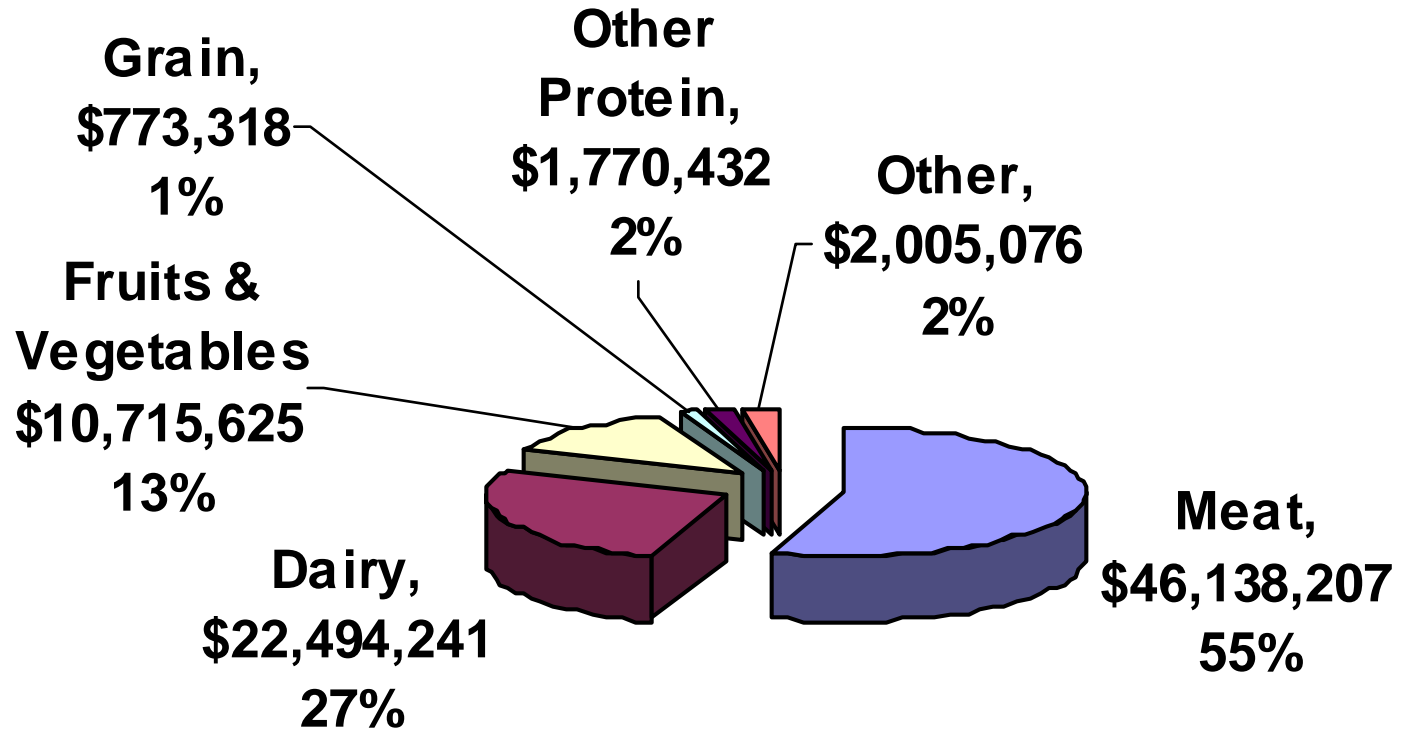
- Literature Review (government and public)
- Quantitative nutrition analysis of selected commodity foods
- Stakeholder interviews
- Focus groups with school food service directors
- Convening of commodity program experts



KEY FINDINGS: Quantitative Nutritional Analysis

Quantitative nutrition analysis: All CA entitlement spending

Commodity Entitlement Dollars Spent in CA, by Food Group '05/'06





Quantitative nutrition analysis: Foods purchased the most

Items on which the most entitlement dollars were spent	
Commodity Item	Percent of all entitlement dollars spent %
Ground raw beef	26%
Part skim and lite mozzarella	13%
Chilled chickens	11%
Yellow and white cheddar cheese	10%
Turkey	8%
Canned Bartlett pears	1%
Breaded chicken	1%
Chicken fajita strips	1%
Boneless pork picnic	1%
Peanut butter	1%

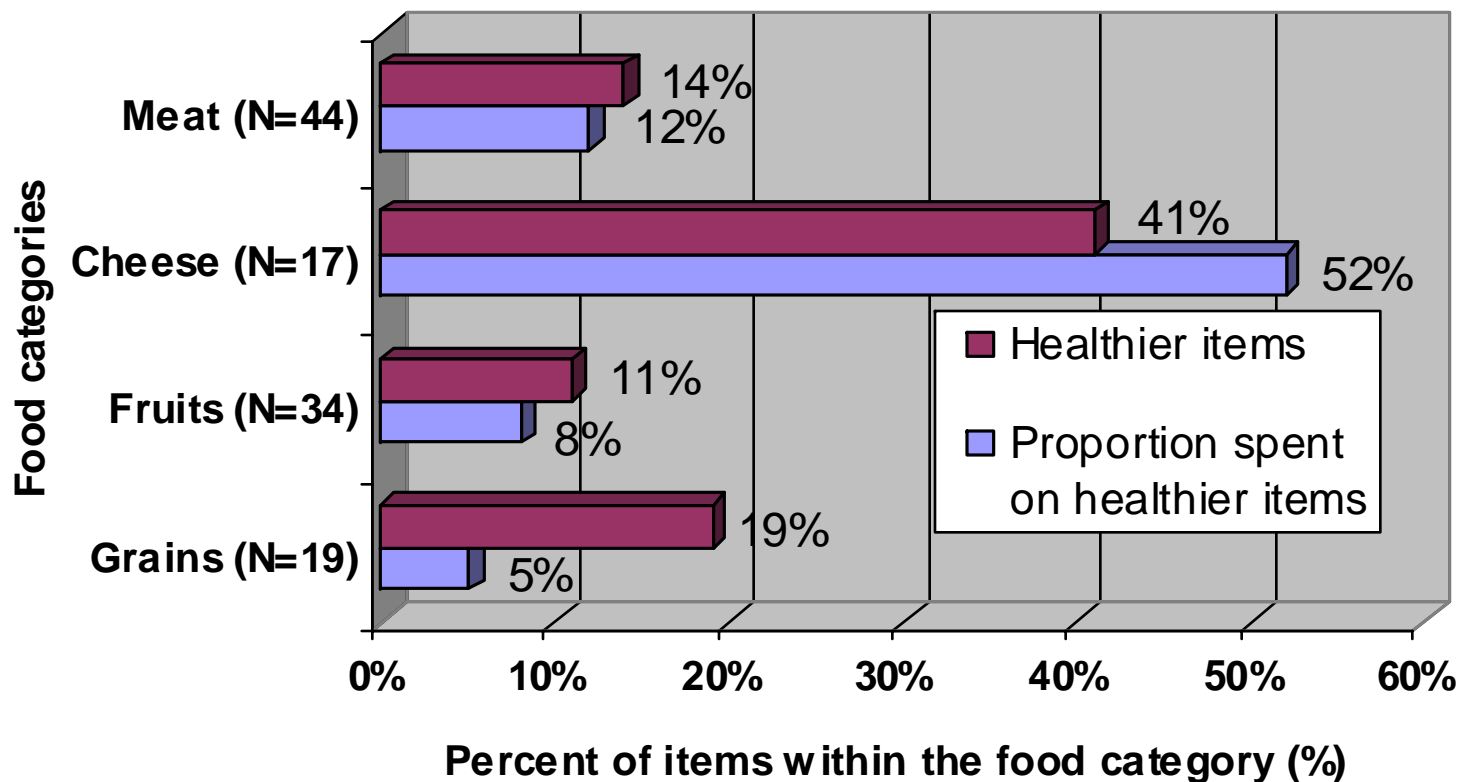


Quantitative nutrition analysis: Foods purchased the least

Items on which the least entitlement dollars were spent	
Commodity Item	Percent of all entitlement dollars spent %
Whole Wheat Flour	0.01%
Garbanzo Beans	0.01%
Canned Tomatoes	0.01%
Whole Eggs	0.02%
Bulk Tomato Paste	0.02%
Rice	0.03%
Crushed Pineapple	0.03%
Peas	0.03%
Kidney Beans	0.03%
Sweet Potatoes	0.04%

Quantitative nutrition analysis: Healthier offerings

Proportion of healthier commodity items





Quantitative nutrition analysis: Key Findings

- **56% of entitlement dollars in CA are spent on items sent to processors**
 - Most frequently processed items
 - Beef, chicken, mozzarella and cheddar



Commodities and dietary guidelines

- **DG: Consume three or more ounce-equivalents of whole-grain products per day**
 - In 2005-2006, California districts ordered approximately \$770,000 worth of grain products
 - Only \$36,000 worth of these were whole grain products (less than five percent).
 - The 42 million pounds of meat and cheese acquired by California schools can be compared to the 164,160 pounds of whole grain products.



Commodities and dietary guidelines

- **DG: Keep total fat intake between 20 to 35 percent of calories**
 - Sources of saturated fats more frequently ordered than sources of mono or polyunsaturated fats
- **DG: Choose fiber-rich fruits, vegetables, and whole grains often.**
 - Commodities offers a number of fiber-rich foods
 - School districts do not frequently choose fiber rich products.



KEY FINDINGS:
Broad themes from
Stakeholder Surveys and
Focus Groups



Key Findings: Program Changes

- **The commodities system has undergone many improvements in recent years.**
 - Lowered fat, sugar and sodium levels
 - Eliminated certain foods and added others to improve commodities' nutrition profile.
 - Improved nutrition information available to school districts



Key Findings: Program Challenges

- **Focus group participants stated that limited nutrition information and technical assistance are concerns.**
- **Some districts in California do not use commodities at all, while others do not use their full entitlement.**

“There are so many districts in the state that don’t utilize commodities. A lot of them don’t even know how to utilize them...they think it’s too much of a hassle.” – Survey respondent



Key Findings: Program Challenges

- **Other challenges/barriers for school districts included:**
 - Complexity of the program
 - Extensive program paperwork burdens
 - Existence of commodity items that conflict with state standards for fat and sodium
 - Occasional canceling of commodity orders by USDA

“Some commodities conflict with healthier options – in sodium and fat – especially for states that have nutrient standards for school meals.” – Survey respondent



Key Findings: Processing

- A number of participants noted that processing can either help nutrition (by reducing fat or making lean meats more available) or hurt nutrition (by adding salt, sugar, oils, etc.).
- Neither USDA nor the states regulate the nutrition content of the food that comes from processors.

“Depends on the [processing] contract. I mean there are a lot of contracts out there where they are not looking at limits on fat, sodium. There are not specifications that states make on processors.” – Survey respondent



Key Findings: DOD Fresh

- Many districts are satisfied with the DOD Fresh program while a few are not.
- DOD Fresh is changing to a new procurement and distribution system.
- DOD administration prohibits local preference in selection of food items.
- Some school districts do not use the full DOD Fresh allocation, and overall DOD Fresh funding is limited

“DOD funds are capped at \$50 million across the United States...it is not enough money... as more states are participating, every state is getting less.”



Potential Policy Options



Potential Policy Options

- Strengthening the state and federal role in commodities
- Improving the nutritional quality of individual commodity items offered.
- Improving processing to strengthen nutrition quality.
- Expanding DOD Fresh.



Potential Policy Options

- Improving the mix of commodities ordered, by focusing on changes within the commodity program.
- Improving the mix of commodities ordered, by focusing on changes outside the commodity program, such as NSLP and the School Meal Initiative.

Contacts

Kenneth Hecht, J.D.
415-777-4422 x102
khecht@cfpa.net



Maria Boyle, MS, RD
Samuels & Associates
(510) 271-6799
maria@samuelsandassociates.com