

bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief
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School-Based Commercialism Higher in Schools with Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Student Populations

Introduction

The marketing of foods and beverages in schools, including activities like sponsorships, exclusive beverage contracts, advertising, fund-raising, and the sale of branded products (such as fast foods available during lunch), is collectively referred to as school-based commercialism. Schools present highly desirable marketing environments. Students are captive audiences arranged in pre-segmented age groups, and teachers are viewed as trusted role models who lend added credibility to marketing efforts. School-based commercialism attempts to not only increase direct sales, but also to increase brand recognition and future brand loyalty. However, many concerns have been raised about the psychological, educational, and health consequences of school-based commercialism.

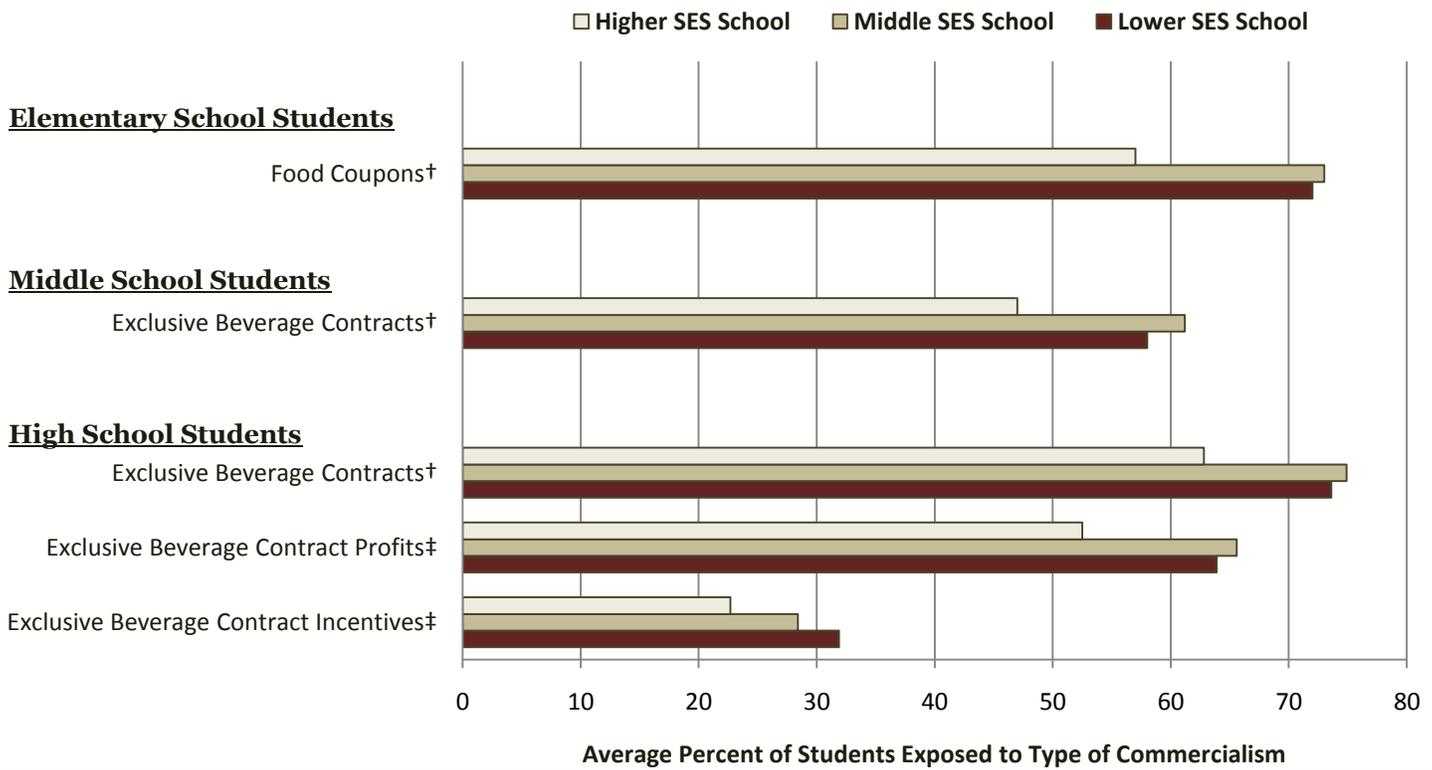
This brief describes observed differences in elementary and secondary school commercialism based on student body socioeconomic status (SES). The study utilizes six years of data (2007-2012) from two parallel surveys conducted through the *Bridging the Gap* research program. Elementary school data were collected through the Food and Fitness study; middle and high school data were collected through the Youth, Education, and Society study.

Key Findings

The most prevalent type of commercialism was quite different for elementary versus secondary students. Two-thirds of elementary school students attended schools using food coupons as student incentives, versus only 5 percent of secondary students. In contrast, half of middle and 70 percent of high school students attended schools with exclusive beverage contracts, versus only 3 percent of elementary students. For both elementary and secondary students, exposure to these types of commercialism was higher for students in lower SES schools than higher SES schools.

- Elementary students attending lower and middle SES schools had significantly higher exposure to food coupons than elementary students in higher SES schools.
- Attending a school with an exclusive beverage contract was significantly more likely for middle and high school students in middle and lower SES schools than for their peers in higher SES schools.
- Attending a school that received exclusive beverage contract incentives or profits was significantly more likely for high school students in lower SES schools than for those in higher SES schools.

Percentages of U.S. Public Elementary and Secondary Students Attending Schools with Specific Forms of School-Based Commercialism by Student Body Socio-Economic Status, 2007-2012



Notes: Higher SES school: Less than 15% of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRLP). Middle SES school: 15%-39% of students eligible for FRLP. Lower SES school: 40% or more students eligible for FRLP. †Higher SES significantly less ($p < .05$) than both middle and lower SES. ‡Higher SES significantly less ($p < .05$) than lower SES.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The majority of U.S. elementary, middle, and high school students attend schools where they are exposed to commercialism aimed at obtaining food or beverage sales or developing brand recognition and loyalty for future sales. School-based commercialism offers highly desired income for cash-strapped schools and districts. Efforts to improve school nutrition environments and reduce student commercialism exposure have left many school decision-makers concerned about revenue loss. Reviews of available studies examining schools that have updated nutrition guidelines and/or modified marketing practices indicate most schools do not experience overall revenue loss as a result of these changes as commercialism benefits are often less than expected. Yet districts that are more heavily involved in school-based commercialism have fewer financial resources. Such patterns are consistent with the current study which found more involvement with commercialism among schools with the most economically disadvantaged student populations—populations that also currently experience higher rates of overweight and obesity.

The United States Department of Agriculture recently published an interim final rule updating nutrition standards for snacks and beverages sold in schools participating in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. These standards should significantly improve the nutritional quality of items sold in school stores, vending machines, and à la carte lines. The high prevalence of school-based commercialism confirms an additional need for clear and enforceable standards on the nutrition content of all foods and beverages marketed to students in all schools.

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This brief is based on the study “Commercialism in US Elementary and Secondary School Nutrition Environments: Trends from 2007-2012” available at: <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/>.

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