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# **Fundraising Practices in Connecticut Public Elementary Schools (2009-2010)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **BACKGROUND**

School environments are key locations to improve children's nutrition and promote physical activity on a national scale. Competitive foods, high in fat and/or sugar, are widely available in schools. Fundraising practices have been identified as a key contributor to the undermining of healthy school environments. In order to develop strong policy initiatives for competitive foods it is necessary to understand current fundraising practices. The purpose of this study is to describe fundraising in Connecticut elementary schools for the 2009-2010 school year.

### **METHODS**

Respondents were solicited from a random sample of the 663 Connecticut public elementary schools, stratified by District Reference Group (DRG). Phone and paper interviews were conducted to collect information on prevalence and type of fundraiser, profit and total volunteer hours for each fundraiser, and knowledge of written school policy regarding fundraising practices.

### **RESULTS**

Distribution of fundraisers and median profit were statistically different when stratified by socioeconomic status. Median profit, person-hours, profit-per-hour were not statistically different when stratified by fundraising type.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Descriptive data from this study suggest non-food fundraisers may generate similar levels of profit under comparable volunteer hours as food fundraisers. School fundraisers can have a positive impact on school food environments through evidence-based policy initiatives at the national level.

## **BACKGROUND**

School environments are key locations to improve children's nutrition and promote physical activity on a national scale<sup>1</sup>. With more than 77 million children and young adults enrolled in school, supporting healthy school food environments and emphasizing physical activity are productive preventative measures against children's health threats like overweight and obesity<sup>2</sup>. Improving the health status of children has positive benefits both in as well as outside of the classroom. Children who are healthy and fit maintain higher attendance, have greater attention spans, and reach higher academic achievement<sup>2-4</sup>. The school's role in facilitating a healthy food environment is of particular interest to interventionists and policy makers alike. Children and adolescents consume anywhere from 19 to 50 percent of their total calorie intake during the school day<sup>2</sup>. Ensuring children are provided with not only healthy food choices but also positive messaging to instill lasting behavior change is a vital role school officials and board members must take on under supportive policy initiatives.

In the last decade, much has been done at the policy level in an attempt to improve the school food and physical activity environment. In 2004, a required school wellness policy was added to the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act<sup>5</sup>, in an effort to help school boards think critically about providing a healthy school environment. The Institute of Medicine published a report in 2006 addressing the issue of unhealthy food marketing to children, including product placement and corporate sponsorship at sports events<sup>6</sup>. Finally, in 2010 the Obama Administration passed the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, mandating that the USDA update and improve the nutrition standards for the National School Lunch Program and develop nutritional standards for competitive foods<sup>7</sup>. A final rule for competitive food standards is set to publish summer 2013<sup>8</sup>. In addition to national level policies some states and local districts schools have implemented rigorous policies to promote healthy school food environments throughout the school day including competitive foods<sup>9</sup>.

Competitive foods are defined as food items sold outside of and in direct competition with the school meal programs, including vending machines, a la carte food items, school stores, and fundraising<sup>10</sup>. Research has found competitive foods are overwhelmingly high in fat and/or sugar, low in nutrients, and widely available in schools<sup>11</sup>. Students with access to competitive foods consume an additional 150 calories per day, significantly contributing to overweight and obesity among children<sup>12, 13</sup>. Kubik and colleagues found that, for every additional competitive

food practice in a school environment, including food sales for classroom and school-wide fundraising, student's BMI increased 10%<sup>13</sup>. Access to competitive foods increases as students move through the education system, with little to no regulation of competitive foods sold in high school<sup>14</sup>.

Fundraising plays a unique role in the school food environment. To supplement school budgets, student groups and parent-teacher organizations fundraise through a variety of means including large events (such as silent auctions, holiday themed parties, dances), product sales (like wrapping paper, magazines, or candy sales), and snack bars or concession stands<sup>9</sup>. In 2006 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) conducted a national survey and found 46% of schools permit bake good items high in fat to be sold as part of fundraising<sup>15</sup>. School food advocates such as Center for Science in the Public Interest and Action for Healthy Kids have identified unhealthy fundraising practices as a key contributor to the undermining of healthy school environments and parental supervision. These organizations have published multiple toolkits and guides to promote healthy fundraising alternatives<sup>9, 16</sup>.

Despite recent discourse on fundraising in schools, including resistance from parent organizations, little research has been done to investigate the fundraising practices in schools. Parent groups in opposition of healthy guidelines for fundraisers cite profit loss due to lack of popularity of healthy food items or events, however little evidence supports these claims<sup>9, 17</sup>. In addition to a lack of cost-benefit analysis on different types of fundraisers, little is understood on how socioeconomic status of school districts influences fundraising practices. An interesting dynamic emerges when discussing fundraising in the context of economic need compared to parent volunteer time commitment. For low income school districts there is a greater need for supplemental funds for school activities, but a potential void of parent volunteers due to single parent homes and/or multiple jobs. Conversely, low income school districts may host a larger number of fundraisers due to insufficient school funds, compared to wealthier districts. Understanding the role fundraisers have in school food environments, what types of fundraisers produce the greatest cost-benefit, and how socioeconomic status plays a role in fundraising practices are all essential to help guide competitive food policies.

The purpose of this study is to describe fundraising practices in Connecticut public schools in 2009-2010, by comparing profit and profit-per-person-hour generated by food-based fundraisers compared to non-food fundraisers, and to compare profit and types of fundraisers

distribution by socioeconomic status of schools. It is hypothesized food fundraisers will not generate substantially greater profits compared to non-food fundraiser. When stratified by socioeconomic levels, it is hypothesized food fundraisers may be more prevalent in lower economic school districts and less profit will be generated. The results may contribute to the development of comprehensive, informed competitive food guidelines, which may address fundraising in schools.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Presidents and executive committee members of 53 school parent group organizations in Connecticut participated in this study. Parent group organization and structure vary by school district and include the national parent-teacher association (PTA), locally based parent-teacher organizations (PTO), or other structure forms. Survey respondents must have led and/or organized fundraising activities or have access to needed information on fundraisers including profit and number of volunteer hours. Respondents were solicited from a random sample of the 663 Connecticut public elementary schools, stratified by District Reference Group (DRG). All Connecticut public school districts are classified into one of 9 tiers (A through I) based on an algorithm including: socioeconomic status (median family income, parental education, parental occupation), need (percentage of children living in families with a single parent, percentage of public school children eligible for free/reduced-price lunch, percentage of children with families who primarily speak a language other than English at home), and district enrollment<sup>18</sup>. For the purpose of this study, DRGs were divided into tertiles, grouping A-C as the highest third, D-F as the middle third, and G-I in the lowest third.

In 2006, Connecticut developed a state wide policy to specifically address competitive foods. Connecticut's Healthy Food Certification (HFC) is an incentive-based program under which school districts voluntarily comply with stringent nutritional competitive food standards in exchange for an additional 10 cents per National School Lunch meal sold<sup>19</sup>. Local school boards have the authority to grant exemptions for food sold outside of the normal school day. Thus, while the majority of competitive food is sold during the school day and regulated by HFC standards, caveats and exceptions permit parent groups to sell and distribute some non-qualifying

food items on school property and around children. All schools participating in this study were eligible to participate in HFC.

### **Instruments**

An interview was developed specifically for this study, and covered three topic areas: 1) background information on the specific parent organization, 2) school fundraising policies, and 3) specific fundraiser information [Appendix 1]. Variables of interest included: number and type of fundraiser, profit and total volunteer hours for each fundraiser, and knowledge of a written school policy regarding fundraising practices. Information on fundraisers focused on the previous four months before the survey was administered, which covered the period of September – December 2009. The survey was pilot tested on nine parent group representatives and a manual of procedures was developed to assist interviewers. Paper-and-pencil versions of the survey were also developed to accommodate participants who were not able to schedule an interview but were willing to complete a survey. A copy of the interview/survey is available from the corresponding author upon request.

### **Procedure**

A total of 179 parent group representatives were contacted for participation in the study using information ascertained through school websites and secretaries; 127 were contacted initially by telephone and 52 by mail. Non-respondents of the mail-out were followed up by telephone. Out of the 53 interviews conducted, 44 were performed over the phone and 9 were returned by paper survey. The overall response rate was 29.6%. Two interviews were excluded from the final analysis because the parent representative fundraised for more than one school. Non-responders were distributed approximately equally across DRG tertiles. Respondents received a \$10 Amazon.com gift card and were entered in a raffle to win a \$100 gift card. Phone interviews required verbal consent and paper surveys were returned with a signed consent form.

The protocol was approved by the Yale University Institutional Review Board.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis was conducted to estimate the distribution of fundraisers, median total profit, median number of person-hours, and median profit per person-hour for fundraisers in

Connecticut public schools. All statistical procedures were performed using Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) (version 9.2, 2008, SAS Institute, Cary, NC). Statistical significance of differences between DRG groups and fundraising types was assessed by nonparametric ANOVA tests. Nonparametric tests were used due to the small sample size and variability in number of fundraisers from each parent respondent. Differences were considered statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

Fundraisers were coded based on whether or not food was present at the fundraiser event. Fundraisers were considered to have sold or included food if the parent group representative specifically cited food at the event, fundraised through catalog sales that sold food, or food was deduced to be present based on interview responses. Fundraisers were categorized as 'non food' if interview respondents specifically noted the absence of food and no food was presumed to be present based on additional interview responses. Indirect food fundraisers were categorized as fundraisers that did not directly require the purchase of food. For example, Box Top for Education is a school fundraiser sponsored by General Mills where schools earn cash back on parent purchases of General Mills products, the majority of which are food items<sup>20</sup>. Fundraisers were coded independently by two separate coders, and discrepancies were mediated by a third party so that consensus was reached on all coding.

## **RESULTS**

Fifty-one parent group representatives were interviewed; 43% were from the highest (N=22), 33% from the middle (N=17), and 23.5% from the lowest (N=12). Over half of the parents interviewed represented Pre-K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade schools; only 7 parent group representatives fundraised in schools that included 7<sup>th</sup> and/or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Thirty-nine percent of parent group representatives were members of a PTA, 55% were members of a PTO, and 5.8% were members of other parent groups. Twenty-four percent of the parents reported four fundraisers in a three month period, with a minimum of one (7.8%) and maximum of twelve (3.9%).

The distribution of type of fundraiser differed across socioeconomic DRG with 59% of non-food fundraisers in the highest DRG group and 58% of food fundraisers among the lowest DRG group ( $p < 0.005$ ) [Table 1]. The median profit from fundraisers also differed across DRG, schools with the greatest resources generated more profit than those in the middle or with few resources ( $p = 0.05$ ) [Table 1]. Food, non-food, and indirect food fundraisers did not differ in



median profits generated, median person-hours, or median profits per person-hour [Table 2-3]. The highest grossing event was a non-food, parent auction fundraiser, profiting \$40,000.

Forty-nine percent of parent group representatives interviewed were fundraising for schools participating in the CT Healthy Food Certification for the 2009-2010 school year. When asked if there was a written policy regarding fundraising, 80% of respondents in districts participating in CT Healthy Food Certification were not aware of a written policy.

## **DISCUSSION**

Fundraising practices in Connecticut public elementary schools are wide-ranging, varying in quantity and type. Practices vary by the socioeconomic status of the community in which the school is situated.

As hypothesized, food fundraisers did not generate a greater, or statistically significant, profit compared to non-food fundraising events. This suggests resistance to state nutritional guidelines for fundraisers from parent organizations on the basis of reduced profit margins may be unfounded<sup>17</sup>. Of note, the highest grossing fundraiser was a parent night auction of donated items from local stores and individuals. Results from this study support nutrition advocacy groups and their promotion of non-food events for school fundraisers. Additionally, profit-per-person-hour was not statistically different stratified by fundraising type suggesting food fundraisers may not be more cost-effective as previously argued<sup>17</sup>. Given the limited commitment many parents can make to parent-group organizations it would be advantageous for parent groups to maximize the cost-benefit of fundraisers. Descriptive data presented in this study suggests parent organizations should consider non-food fundraisers, not only to benefit and support a healthy school environment but also to increase the cost effectiveness of the fundraising program.

The highest DRG group, representing the least financially constrained school districts, had the greatest number of fundraisers and the least number of food fundraisers. Conversely the lowest DRG, representing the most financially restricted school districts, had the least number of fundraisers and over 50% of the fundraisers included food. These results are partially consistent with our hypothesis that lower socioeconomic status school districts profit less money, however contrary to our hypothesis lowest DRG schools also host fewer fundraisers on average. Results

from this study suggest parental time constraint may be a limiting factor in fundraising for lower socioeconomic schools.

Results from the policy portion of the survey are of particular interest. Out of the 25 schools (49%) surveyed participating in CT Healthy Food Certification, 80% of the parent respondents were not aware of a written school policy. HFC very explicitly regulates fundraising with food, requiring schools to meet nutrition standards for any food sold on school grounds during the school day. Our findings indicate that those in charge of the fundraising are unaware of policies regulating their activities, suggesting the need for more rigorous oversight of translation of policy to practice.

**Table 1.** Median and frequencies for fundraiser variables by District Reference Group (High, Middle, Low)

Characteristics	District Reference Group		
	Highest(N=99) N (%)	Middle(N=90) N (%)	Lowest(N=42) N (%)
Food Sold**			
No	59 (59.0)	43 (47.8)	17 (39.5)
Yes	32 (32.0)	29 (33.2)	25 (58.1)
Indirect	8 (8.0)	18 (20.0)	0 (0)
Profit Goal			
Yes	69 (69.0)	48 (54.6)	23 (53.5)
No	31 (31.0)	40 (45.5)	20 (46.5)
Time of School Day			
During	17 (17.0)	11 (12.4)	9 (20.9)
After	59 (59.0)	55 (61.8)	24 (55.8)
Both	24 (24.0)	23 (25.8)	10 (23.3)
	Median (Min, Max) 1613 (42, 40,000)	Median (Min, Max) 1050 (50, 14,000)	Median (Min, Max) 1500 (0, 11,000)
Profit (\$)*			

\* p < .05, \*\*p < .01

**Table 2.** Median fundraising profit by Type of Fundraiser

Characteristics	Type of Fundraisers		
	No Food Sold (N=119) Median (Min, Max)	Food Sold (N=85) Median (Min, Max)	Indirect Food Sold (N=26) Median (Min, Max)
Profit (\$)	1239 (0, 40,000)	1600 (50, 15,000)	725 (100, 12,000)

Table 3. Median person-hours and profit/hour by Type of Fundraiser

Characteristics	Type of Fundraisers		
	No Food Sold (N=32) Median (Min, Max)	Food Sold (N=26) Median (Min, Max)	Indirect Food Sold (N=7) Median (Min, Max)
Person-Hours	11 (1, 240)	10 (2, 240)	6 (0, 60)
Profit / Hour	60 (0, 4000)	100 (11, 875)	100 (25, 1000)

### **Limitations**

This study represents a first foray into documenting fundraising practices in elementary schools. The sample size was relatively small resulting in limited power for some comparisons and was confined to elementary schools from a single state, a state in which food fundraising is regulated to some degree. Future studies should include larger samples with greater regional heterogeneity. It has been noted that competitive foods make a greater contribution to obesity among middle and high schools<sup>21-23</sup>, thus study of older grades will be an important future endeavor. While parent organizations conduct most of the fundraising in elementary schools, older children begin to take over some of this responsibility, so fundraising practices are expected to be quite different in middle and high schools, and food may play a greater or lesser role. Finally, this study did not distinguish between healthy food fundraisers and unhealthy food fundraisers. Future studies should aim to determine if non-food fundraisers provide greater cost-benefit compared to healthy food fundraisers.

### **Conclusions**

Descriptive data from this study suggest non-food fundraisers are able to generate similar levels of profit and require similar levels of effort as food fundraisers. More research with larger samples in spanning broader geography and age groups would contribute to a greater understanding of the school fundraising landscape. However, data presented in this study provides some initial quantitative support that policy changes in fundraising can be implemented while maintaining financial success of fundraising initiatives. These findings are timely in the context of implementation of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010<sup>7</sup>.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH**

School fundraisers can have a positive impact on school food environments. This study represents the first quantitative data describing food and non-food fundraising in elementary schools. Competitive foods are currently under scrutiny for inhibiting the strides National School Lunch Program has made to improve the nutritional quality of children's diets in school. Shown to be directly related to increased BMI, competitive foods pose a clear threat to a healthy school environment<sup>12</sup>. Developing national guidelines for parent organizations and fundraising promotes healthier school environments, supports the efforts of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010<sup>7</sup>, and may in fact increase the efficiency of parent organizations. Parent group representatives from this study added comments supporting the effort to reduce food fundraisers in schools. These findings provide greater incentive to promote and support non-food and/or physical activity fundraisers such as family 5k and walk-athons.

Impressive strides at the national level have improved the school food environment. Findings from this study suggest that with the implementation of policy changes and nutrition guidance under the competitive food bill and utilizing non-food fundraising toolkits from nutrition advocacy groups<sup>16</sup>, parent organization groups can play a vital role in supporting the health of their children.

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## APPENDICIES

### Appendix 1. Interview Tool for Data Collection

#### General Instructions

Think about all of the fundraisers your parent group has performed for your school in September–December 2009. Examples include, but are not limited to the following:

- Catalogs
- Bake sales
- Book fairs
- Fruit sales
- Events
- Gift card sales
- Restaurant or store proceeds
- Coupon books
- Label drives (e.g., Box Tops)
- Membership dues
- Cash donations
- Recycling drives

Exclude fundraisers where money was raised for an outside organization or charity. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Check one box for each item, unless the directions indicate otherwise.

Thank you for your participation!

#### Background Information

a. What grades are in your school? <i>Please check all that apply.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Pre-K	<input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 2	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 3	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 4	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 5	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 6	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 7	<input type="checkbox"/> Grade 8	
b. What type of parent group do you have?	<input type="checkbox"/> PTO	<input type="checkbox"/> PTA	<input type="checkbox"/> PAC	<input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ): _____							
c. How many school(s) does your parent group do fundraising for?	<input type="checkbox"/> The entire school district <input type="checkbox"/> A few schools within the district <input type="checkbox"/> One school only										
d. In total, how many years have you been a <b>member</b> of this parent group?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 year	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 4 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 5 or more years						
e. In total, how many years have you been <b>president</b> of this parent group?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 year	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 4 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 5 or more years						
	<input type="checkbox"/> I am not the president ( <i>please specify your role and # of years in this position</i> ): _____										
f. Is your parent group the primary fundraising group at the school?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No ( <i>please specify primary fundraising group</i> ): _____						<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know			
g. How is fundraising money used at your school? <i>Please check all that apply.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> To pay for everyday items (e.g., teaching supplies, instructional materials, computers, technical equipment, playgrounds) <input type="checkbox"/> To sponsor school programs (e.g., events, graduations, activities, guest speakers, or field trips) <input type="checkbox"/> To pay for extracurricular programs and equipment (e.g., sports, drama, music, after school programs) <input type="checkbox"/> To pay for teacher or staff appreciation gifts or student scholarships <input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ): _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Other ( <i>please specify</i> ): _____										

→ Please turn over

## Fundraising Goals and Guidelines

a. Which statement best describes your school or school district **written** policy on the specific **foods** and **beverages** that can be sold for fundraisers?

There is **no written policy** specifically addressing what items can be sold.

Our written policy allows us to sell **any** foods or beverages.

Our written policy allows us to sell **any** foods or beverages, **except** for certain items (*please specify*): \_\_\_\_\_

Our written policy allows us to sell **only healthy** foods or beverages.

Our written policy does **not allow us to sell** foods or beverages.

Don't know

Other (*please specify*): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

b. Please describe the written policy in more detail or other aspects of the fundraising policy in general.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

c. Do you have a financial fundraising goal for this school year?

Yes (*please specify the amount*): \$ \_\_\_\_\_

No

d. Think about the **most profitable** fundraiser conducted in September–December 2009. Which elements helped make it more profitable than the others?

*Name of the most profitable fundraiser:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Please check all that apply.*

It was the first fundraiser of the year.

We retained all or a high margin of the profits.

Students were involved through contests, taste tests, etc.

We conducted extensive marketing or promotions.

We surveyed parents and this was their preferred fundraiser.

It's an annual fundraiser that parents have come to expect.

Family members, friends, and coworkers could purchase items to increase sales.

We coordinated the fundraiser with a holiday.

The catalog sold a wide variety of items.

Other (*please specify*): \_\_\_\_\_



## Fundraiser Instructions

- This section asks about each fundraiser you conducted in September–December 2009. **Please complete one sheet for each fundraiser you did.**
- There is room for you to describe up to 12 fundraisers. Add additional sheets, if necessary.
- Consider food sold for a profit at an event as a separate fundraiser from the event itself.
- For yearlong fundraisers, think about what has occurred so far in September–December 2009.
- You will have completed this survey when you've finished describing each fundraiser that occurred in September–December 2009.

### Fundraiser #1

a.	What type of fundraiser did you hold?	Type of item sold or type of event: _____ If applicable, company name: _____ In detail, describe item sold or event: _____ _____
b.	During which month(s) did the fundraiser occur?	<input type="checkbox"/> September <input type="checkbox"/> October <input type="checkbox"/> November <input type="checkbox"/> December <i>Please check all that apply.</i>
c.	Were you the <b>lead person</b> on this fundraiser?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes (specify total # of lead people): _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No (specify total # of lead people): _____
d.	How many total hours did the <b>lead people</b> spend planning, organizing, and carrying out this fundraiser?	_____ hours <i>Think about the hours each lead person spent per week, add these up and then multiply by the number of weeks the fundraiser lasted. Consider tasks such as making flyers, distributing orders, and length of the event.</i>
e.	How many <b>total adults</b> , including you and lead people, assisted with this fundraiser?	_____ adults <i>For bake sales, include all parents who baked goods.</i>
f.	How much profit did this fundraiser yield?	\$ _____ <i>If you don't know the profit, use last year as an estimate. If the fundraiser is yearlong, consider profits September–December only or split last year's profits in half.</i>
g.	Was there a profit goal for this fundraiser?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes (please specify the amount): \$ _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>If the fundraiser is yearlong, split the profit goal in half.</i>
h.	When was this fundraiser performed?	<input type="checkbox"/> During the school day <input type="checkbox"/> After the school day <input type="checkbox"/> Both <i>Picking up or dropping off orders counts as "after the school day."</i>
i.	Where was this fundraiser performed?	<input type="checkbox"/> On school property <input type="checkbox"/> Off school property <input type="checkbox"/> Both <i>Picking up or dropping off orders counts as "off school property."</i>
j.	Any other comments you would like to share about this fundraiser?	_____ _____