

## Healthy Eating Research: Building Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity



Round 1: School Food  
Policies and Environments

### Call for Proposals

#### Proposal Deadline

March 7, 2006

## Program Overview

(Please refer to specific sections for complete detail.)

### Purpose

*Healthy Eating Research* is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program will support research to identify, analyze and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis will be given to research projects that will benefit children in the low-income and racial/ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. This first round of funding focuses on school food policies and environments.

### Eligibility Criteria (page 12)

- Preference will be given to applicants who are tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and are not private foundations as defined under Section 509(a).
- Applicant organizations must be based in the U.S. or U.S. Territories.
- The focus of this program is the United States; studies of policies in other countries will be considered only to the extent that they may directly inform U.S. policy.

### Selection Criteria (page 12)

For a complete list of selection criteria, please see Page 12.

### Total Awards

A total of approximately \$3 million will be awarded in this round of funding for two types of research grants:

- Studies to identify and/or evaluate promising school food environment and policy changes. These include:
  - 12- to 18-month awards of up to \$100,000.
  - 18- to 36-month awards of up to \$400,000.
- Analyses of macro-level policy or system determinants of school food environments and policies:
  - 12- to 18-month awards of up to \$75,000.

### Deadline

- **March 7, 2006 (3 p.m. EST)**—Deadline for receipt of proposals.

### How to Apply (page 15)

All proposals must be submitted through the RWJF Grantmaking Online system.

Please direct inquiries to:

Tim Crowley, *Administrative Coordinator*

Phone: (888) 635-7433

E-mail: [healthyeatingresearch@rwjf.org](mailto:healthyeatingresearch@rwjf.org)

[www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org)

## Background

Obesity rates in the United States have doubled among children and tripled among adolescents over the past 20 years and pose a serious threat to the health of the nation. Today, almost 9 million U.S. children over 6 years of age are considered obese. Cumulative changes in children's food environments over the past few decades have increased the availability, appeal, affordability and consumption of low-nutrient, energy-dense foods and beverages. As a result, fewer than 20 percent of the nation's children over 2 years of age eat the recommended daily number of servings of fruits and vegetables, and many children consume excess fat and calories. At the same time, physical activity has been engineered out of children's daily routines, making it even more important to improve children's access and exposure to healthy foods in order to achieve the energy balance required for a healthy body weight.

The 2005 Institute of Medicine report, *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, concluded that corrective environmental and policy changes are potentially the most powerful—but currently the least well understood—strategies for addressing childhood obesity. At present, little is known about the most important environmental influences that affect children's eating patterns and weight, or about the most feasible and effective policies for improving children's food environments. *Healthy Eating Research* aims to reduce this knowledge gap by supporting research to identify the policies and environmental strategies that have the greatest potential to improve children's diets and to halt the nation's rising levels of childhood obesity. This program complements the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Active Living Research* initiative, which is building evidence that will inform effective policy and environmental strategies to increase levels of physical activity, including among children and adolescents.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is committed to tackling childhood obesity and

the threat it poses to the health of our nation's children and families. Our goal is to halt the rise in childhood obesity rates by promoting healthy eating and physical activity in schools and communities throughout the U.S. We place special emphasis on reaching the children at greatest risk: African-American, Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities.

## The Program

*Healthy Eating Research* is a five-year, \$11-million RWJF national program. The goals of *Healthy Eating Research* are to:

- Establish a strong research base on policy and environmental determinants of healthy eating and body weight in children, and effective policy and environmental strategies for curbing childhood obesity.
- Build a vibrant, multidisciplinary field of research and a diverse network of researchers.
- Ensure that findings are effectively communicated to inform policy debates and guide the development of effective solutions.

### *Terminology*

For the purposes of this Call for Proposals:

- **Healthy eating** to promote health and maintain an optimum body weight involves eating the recommended types and amounts of foods, nutrients and calories and limiting low-nutrient, high-fat and high-sugar foods and beverages.
- Children's **food environments** refer to a range of modifiable influences on children's food choices and intake, including food access, availability, characteristics (e.g., energy and nutrient density, portion size) and promotion (e.g., price, placement, packaging, point-of-purchase nutrition information). These influences operate in many settings where

children spend their time (e.g., home, child care, school, community).

- **Food policies** operate in many settings and at many levels. Examples include incentives for and restrictions on the sale and marketing of low-nutrient, energy-dense foods and beverages in schools; incentives for grocery stores that locate in low-income communities; requirements for nutrition labeling in restaurants and fast food outlets; government dietary guidelines; food subsidies; and regulatory standards for nutrition assistance programs and food marketing practices.

*Healthy Eating Research* will release annual Calls for Proposals to solicit scientifically rigorous, solution-oriented proposals from investigators and scholars representing diverse disciplines and backgrounds. ***This first round of funding focuses on school food policies and environments.***

### ***Round 1: School Food Policies and Environments***

Schools are a critical setting for addressing childhood obesity. More than 54 million U.S. children attend school; a substantial portion of their daily food and caloric intake occurs within the school environment. Even small changes in consumption patterns during the school day could have substantial effects on children's weight and obesity levels. Policy-makers, school boards, parents and civic groups, as well as food producers and suppliers, are taking action to improve the quality and nutritional and caloric content of school foods. This past year, more than 40 states introduced legislation intended to promote healthier eating patterns and food environments for children, and hundreds of school systems are moving to implement such reforms. However, schools are implementing strategies without evidence of their likely impact, potentially making large investments of effort and resources that may or may not result in meaningful benefits.

With this first round of funding, *Healthy Eating Research* aims to explore the potential influence of changes in school food policies and environments and take advantage of the opportunity to learn from the wave of state and local school policy and environmental changes that are currently under way. The program also seeks to identify macro-level policy approaches to improving school food environments and dietary intake in order to curb obesity levels. The program's overall aim is to provide key decision- and policy-makers in many sectors with empirical evidence to guide and accelerate effective action.

Approximately \$3 million is available in this round of funding for rigorous, policy-relevant research grants in two major categories:

- Small- and large-scale studies to identify and/or evaluate promising school food environment and policy changes.
- Analyses of macro-level policy or system determinants of school food environments and policies.

Grants in both categories should focus on identifying policy and environmental strategies in schools and, if appropriate, in the vicinities immediately surrounding them. They should demonstrate potential to improve healthy eating and help children achieve the energy balance required for a healthy body weight, especially in the low-income and racial/ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. Target populations can include children in grades K-12 from elementary, middle or high schools. Round 1 topics are outlined below.

1. **Studies to identify or evaluate school food environment and policy changes with promise to improve healthy eating and prevent childhood obesity. We anticipate awarding approximately eight to ten small-scale grants of up to \$100,000 over 12-18 months, and four to five larger-scale grants of up to \$400,000 over 18-36 months.**

This category of grants may include studies to identify the modifiable correlates of children's eating patterns and obesity rates; studies of promising school environmental interventions or policy changes; evaluations of reforms taking place in schools, including their benefits and limitations; and opportunistic studies designed to learn from natural variation in existing school food policies and environments, or from other actions to create healthier school food environments.

Factors that distinguish small and large grants relate more to the scope of work and the level and duration of funding than to the topics studied. **Smaller-scale studies** are likely to be more limited in scope, to include correlational rather than intervention studies, to rely on secondary data analyses or limited original data collection, and to be pilot studies. **Larger-scale studies** are likely to focus on a broader set of policy and environmental influences, to involve more costly or complex secondary data analysis, or to include significant original data collection. Both small- and large-scale projects may be conducted as supplements to existing studies.

#### *Types of Studies*

Small- and large-scale awards could include the following types of studies:

- Planned experimental or quasi-experimental studies that evaluate the impact of a policy/environmental change under more controlled conditions. This could include experimental studies of practical interventions to increase the consumption of healthy foods (e.g., changes in energy and nutrient density, portion size, price, placement or promotion of school foods).
- Natural experiments that evaluate the impact of national, state or local school policy and environmental changes. Such studies could focus on children's access to healthy foods, changes in dietary/caloric intake, changes in weight or body mass index (BMI) or related school-level outcomes (e.g., school revenues).

- Secondary analyses of existing data sets (e.g., cross-sectional or longitudinal analyses or statistical modeling using national survey data from public or private sources).
- Pilot studies focused on promising policy and environmental interventions or small-scale simulations. Such studies might vary the energy density, portion size, price or promotion (e.g., point-of-purchase information) of foods sold or offered in schools.
- Financial impact analyses. Such studies might employ a cost-benefit analysis of intended and unintended consequences of policy implementation.

#### *Suggested Topics*

Some examples of possible topics for small and large studies are provided below, with a more extensive set of examples provided on the *Healthy Eating Research* Web site at [www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org). Studies are not limited to these examples.

- Influence of state/local standards governing à la carte or vending foods/beverages on students' food purchases or dietary intake.
- Impact of policies restricting or removing sugar-sweetened beverages or low-nutrient, energy-dense foods on students' food purchases, dietary intake, BMI or school outcomes.
- Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in access to healthy and less healthy foods in schools and in food outlets located close to schools (e.g., grocery and convenience stores, restaurants, fast food outlets).
- Results of simulations testing the use of economic incentives/disincentives (e.g., lowering the relative price of healthy foods) or point-of-purchase food labeling.

#### *Study Guidelines*

The program anticipates funding more small-scale than large-scale studies.

- Mixed design (qualitative and quantitative) studies are welcome. However, studies involving only qualitative data collection (e.g., focus groups) will not be funded.
- Controlled intervention studies (e.g., experimental, quasi-experimental, time series) will be favored over uncontrolled, pre- to post-design studies. The specific hypotheses to be tested should be clearly stated.
- Studies involving data collection in schools require an agreement with the leadership of the participating schools/school systems, specific plans for research consent and Institutional Review Board approval, and plans for feedback of results to the schools involved.
- The particular outcomes studied for grants in this category may vary. Given the limited scope and short duration of these projects, measures of changes in weight or BMI are not required. However, applicants are encouraged to include objective measures of food purchases or dietary consumption (using methods such as automated sales tracking systems, standard food service records or direct observational methods) and to assess variables likely to affect the impact and feasibility of the policy and environmental changes being studied (e.g., demographic variables, school and community characteristics, other contextual variables).
- Measurement development may be included as part of the study, but projects focused solely on measurement development will not be funded.
- This round of funding is focused on school food policy and environmental strategies for promoting healthy eating and preventing obesity in children. Studies focused solely on individual behavior change or educational and curricular interventions will not be funded. Studies of preschool settings will not be funded in this round.

- It is expected that grant funds will be used only to cover the costs of evaluation, not the costs of the policy or environmental changes per se, with the exception of low-cost experimental manipulations (e.g., altering food prices, portion sizes or point-of-purchase labeling).
- Co-funding is welcome, with the sources and amounts fully described in the application.

**2. Analyses of macro-level policy and system determinants of school food policies and environments. Approximately six to eight grants of up to \$75,000 over a 12- to 18-month period are expected to be awarded.**

The quality and types of foods provided to children in school settings are the result of multiple higher-level policies (e.g., agriculture, education, government food assistance programs, legal) and market forces (e.g., economic, industry) that represent potentially powerful levers for change. These important “upstream” influences may be more difficult to modify than those operating at the individual school level, but they carry the potential for wider population impacts. Currently, there is little understanding of these factors and limited research on the role they could play in creating healthier school food environments and policies. Research and analysis may provide imaginative policy ideas for creating healthier school food environments and positively influencing what children eat during the school day.

The aims of these analytic projects are to understand the larger policy context in which schools have become providers and regulators of foods consumed by children and a focal point for nationwide efforts to curb the childhood obesity epidemic. Proposals should therefore: (1) bring rigorous thinking and analysis to identify relevant macro-level strategies; and (2) generate conceptual models, hypotheses and research questions that can guide future research and

inform creative policy solutions. Analytic methods may include, but are not limited to, historical analysis, policy analysis, legal analysis, economic analysis, market analysis, statistical modeling, use of existing databases and case study methods.

*Types of Studies and Suggested Topics*

Examples of analytic studies that may be funded through this initiative include but are not limited to:

- Modeling the effects on children’s diet and body weight of possible changes in federal school-related child nutrition programs, such as the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.
- Analysis of school food revenues and expenses, as well as financial impacts on school food service departments and school administrations of school meal improvements or changes in competitive foods, such as vending, à la carte and fund raisers.
- Analysis of multiple determinants of sociodemographic disparities in school food policies and environments.
- Analysis of schools’ legal obligations/rights to protect students from exposure to unhealthy foods and food advertising and marketing.
- Analysis of business strategies that could improve the quality and nutritional value of school foods and beverages.
- Analysis of current and alternative agricultural subsidies and farm support programs and their impact on commodity foods available in schools.
- Analysis of local land use and zoning policies that have the greatest potential leverage for improving schools’ access to healthy foods, especially in low-income communities.
- Lessons learned from other public health efforts (e.g., tobacco, alcohol, teen pregnancy prevention, seat belt use) for macro-level policy and environmental strategies with promise to promote healthy eating and/or prevent childhood obesity.

### Eligibility Criteria

Preference will be given to applicants that are tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and are not private foundations as defined under Section 509(a). Applicant organizations must be based in the U.S. or U.S. Territories. The focus of this program is the United States; studies of policies in other countries will be considered only to the extent that they may directly inform U.S. policy.

### Selection Criteria

Proposals must demonstrate the ability to produce new information that is directly relevant to school food environment and/or policy change strategies that show promise to improve children's diets and potential to halt the rise in childhood obesity. Special consideration will be given to strategies that will benefit children in the low-income and racial/ethnic populations at greatest risk for obesity. Researchers are encouraged to obtain input from relevant stakeholders, such as policy-makers, school food service leaders, school administrators, parents and students to help assure feasible and policy-relevant project goals and outcomes.

To help build a multidisciplinary field of research, *Healthy Eating Research* seeks proposals from a variety of investigators in a range of fields, such as agriculture, behavioral science, business, economics, education, law, marketing, medicine, nutrition, political science, psychology, public health, public policy and urban planning. The perspectives of researchers who are knowledgeable about racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in school and school-related community food environments are especially needed.

All proposals will be assessed by a committee composed of RWJF staff, National Program Office (NPO) staff at the University of Minnesota, a Senior Program Advisory Panel and other expert reviewers.

The committee will use the following criteria to assess proposals:

- Potential impact on obesity prevention and on the elimination of disparities in children's access to and consumption of healthy foods and beverages.
- Potential to address key knowledge gaps.
- Relevance and timeliness of project to inform policy action.
- Emphasis on widely applicable, feasible and sustainable strategies.
- Relevance to the needs of schools in low-resource communities and children in low-income and racial/ethnic minority populations at highest risk for obesity.
- Clarity of project goals, hypotheses, methods and outcomes.
- Use of a clear theoretical framework, conceptual model or rationale.
- Scientific rigor of proposed research and analytic methods, including quality of data to be used.
- Uniqueness of the project in relation to the mix of potentially fundable projects.
- Research qualifications and experience of the investigator(s) and appropriateness of disciplines and perspectives represented.
- Appropriateness of proposed budget and project timeline.
- Plan for communicating and disseminating research results to scientists, policy-makers and other relevant stakeholders.

This program has a Senior Program Advisory Panel, chaired by Shiriki Kumanyika, Ph.D., M.P.H., University of Pennsylvania, which makes recommendations about grants to Foundation staff. All funding decisions are made by RWJF.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

## Evaluation and Monitoring

Grantees will be expected to meet RWJF requirements for the submission of narrative and financial reports. Given the benefit of measuring common outcomes across the pool of funded grants, funded projects may be asked to incorporate selected core outcome or contextual measures. As part of the application process, finalists will be asked to disclose any financial arrangements (e.g., fees, funding, employment, stock holdings) or relationships that might compromise the credibility or perceived credibility of the findings, mirroring the types of disclosure requested by leading journals.

Grantees will be required to submit periodic information needed for overall project performance monitoring and management. *Healthy Eating Research* staff and consultants will be available to provide technical assistance when needed to ensure the success of the project. At the close of each grant, the grantee is expected to provide a written report on the project and its findings. Program staff will work with investigators to actively communicate the results of funded projects to scientific audiences, media, policy-makers, school decision-makers and educational organizations, public health advocates, the general public and other audiences.

RWJF may undertake an overall evaluation of the *Healthy Eating Research* initiative. Such an evaluation would be conducted by an independent evaluation team and would focus on key questions about the program's overall contributions to informing the policy debate and guiding the design of effective policy and environmental solutions to the childhood obesity epidemic. All grantees, as a condition of accepting grant funds, will be required to participate in such an evaluation.

## Use of Grant Funds

RWJF grant funds may be used for project staff salaries, training, consultant fees, data collection and analysis, dataset procurement, meeting costs, project-related travel and other direct expenses essential to the proposed project, including a limited amount of equipment. However, with the exception of funds for low-cost experimental studies, it is expected that grant funds awarded in this round of funding will be used to cover the costs of evaluation, and not the costs of the school policy or environmental changes per se (e.g., foods, training and implementation efforts). Additional in-kind or external funding is welcome and should be described in the proposal.

In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may *not* be used to subsidize individuals for the costs of their health care, to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, for lobbying, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities.

Principal investigators are expected to participate in an annual grantee meeting. Funds to attend one grantee meeting each year should be included in the proposed budget. The application templates on the *Healthy Eating Research* Web site contain guidelines for travel budgeting.

## How to Apply

***All proposals must be submitted through the RWJF Grantmaking Online system.*** For detailed formatting instructions and to prepare and submit your proposal, please go to <http://grantmaking.rwjf.org/her>.

Applicant Web conference calls will be held on January 6 and January 12, 2006, to answer questions about the Call for Proposals, as well as the application and selection processes. Participation in these calls is strongly encouraged, but is not required. It is necessary to register in advance on the *Healthy Eating Research* Web site at [www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org).

Applicant information, including lists of frequently asked questions and applicant resources, can be found on the program Web site.

For more information on the program, please contact:  
Tim Crowley, *Administrative Coordinator*  
Phone: (888) 635-7433  
E-mail: [healthyeatingresearch@rwjf.org](mailto:healthyeatingresearch@rwjf.org)  
Web site: [www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org)

## Notes

### Program Direction

Direction and technical assistance for this program are provided by the University of Minnesota, which serves as the NPO.

Responsible staff members at the NPO are:

- Mary Story, Ph.D., R.D., *Program Director*
- Robert Jeffery, Ph.D., *Senior Adviser*
- Leslie Lytle, Ph.D., R.D., *Senior Adviser*
- Karen Kaphingst, *Deputy Director*
- Prabhu Ponkshe, M.A., L.L.B., *Communications Director*

Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:

- C. Tracy Orleans, Ph.D., *Senior Scientist and Senior Program Officer*
- Jeane Ann Grisso, M.D., M.Sc., *Senior Program Officer*
- James Marks, M.D., M.P.H., *Senior Vice President and Director, Health Group*
- Laura Leviton, Ph.D., *Senior Program Officer*
- Kathryn Thomas, M.J., *Senior Communications Officer*
- Rona Henry, M.P.H., M.B.A., *Director, National Program Affairs*
- Timothy Crowley, *Administrative Coordinator, National Program Affairs*
- Jan Mihalow, M.S.M., *Grants Administrator*

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## Notes

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## Timetable

### **January 6 and January 12, 2006**

Applicant Web conference calls. For complete details and to register, visit [www.healthyeatingresearch.org](http://www.healthyeatingresearch.org).

### **March 7, 2006 (3 p.m. EST)**

Deadline for receipt of proposals.\*

### **May 2006**

Notification to finalists.

### **July 1, 2006**

Awards begin.

### **July 19–21, 2006**

Grantee meeting.

\* All proposals must be submitted through the RWJF Grantmaking Online system. All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission requirements well before the final submission deadline. Program staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline. In fairness to other applicants, the program will not accept late applications.

## About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. The Foundation seeks to:

- Assure that all Americans have access to quality health care at reasonable cost.
- Improve the quality of care and support for people with chronic health conditions.
- Promote healthy communities and lifestyles.
- Reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse—tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.

For more than 30 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime.

For more information, visit [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).

**Sign up to receive e-mail alerts on upcoming Calls for Proposals at:**

***<http://subscribe.rwjf.org>***

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