

# The Healthy Child: A Challenge for Everyone



I guess we should take pride in the fact that society traditionally turns to schools to help fix many of its ills and concerns. It's a responsibility that we accept, but not without misgivings.

Principals have become used to explaining to communities that schools are being required to do more and more, often with less and less in the way of resources and support, at a time when the fundamental job of educating children is more challenging than ever. So it came as no surprise when the public health issue of national obesity, particularly the growing problem of childhood obesity, focused attention on schools as the prime arena for a solution.

So, how do we respond? We have to think seriously about what's within our reach and what's out of our hands.

We believe the momentum for a strong response to this issue provides an opportunity for schools to play an important role in promoting and improving children's fitness and health. But schools can't do it alone.

## Balancing Priorities

The health of children is hardly a new issue for principals. Coming to school ready to learn is a familiar mantra, and part of being ready to learn is for children to get good nutrition and regular health care so that they are able to attend school regularly and make the most of their time in the classroom.

In our new book, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, NAESP promotes the idea of school readiness as a comprehensive concept that includes health and nutrition. We also note that pre-K programs need to incorporate adequate time for children to be physically active.

As we teach children about the importance of healthy lifestyles, we must be sure that we achieve a proper balance in meeting their emotional, social, and physical needs at every grade level. Those issues, along with academic development, need to be considered when we talk about curriculum and what the school day should look like.

We have to be careful that in the rush to improve test

scores we don't begin to take away activities like recess and physical education that provide an active lifestyle for youngsters. We have to make sure that teaching is explicit about what constitutes good nutrition, and make sure that children understand that hours playing video games can't come at the expense of active informal or organized play.

For our part, we are encouraging schools to provide more nutritious choices in their lunchrooms, and we are working closely with the vending machine industry to provide healthy choices of snacks and beverages.

## Leading the Community

Beyond what principals can do in their schools, there are other facets of the national health issue that they can address in their capacity as community leaders. They can be a major force in pulling community agencies and parents together to focus on such health issues as obesity and the importance of diet and exercise. In doing so at the community level, it might be helpful for principals to avoid dwelling

on terms like "national epidemic" and to frame the issue in local and achievable terms.

Get to know the key players at community agencies and team with local health officials, particularly those providing school-related health services. In an effort like this, principals can have a leading voice in community coalitions that can include a broad cross-section of parents and children.

## A Role for Everyone

Finally, while we can lead in our schools and communities, we must also be straightforward in conceding that children's health and fitness is an issue that must receive support from the larger society and involve parents and children making smarter choices. We need to be clear that everyone has a role to play and that on the national level, principals can only be role players. Still, we should never diminish how meaningful our role and our leadership can be. It's the reason why society looks to schools and their leaders in times of trouble. ■

**"...Part of being ready to learn is for children to get good nutrition and regular health care so that they are able to attend school regularly and make the most of their time in the classroom."**



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