

Champions for Fitness

After learning about America's childhood obesity rate at a leadership summit on urban physical education, I thought, "What a sad way for a little kid to be." At that summit, I learned that an estimated 17 percent of the nation's children are obese. This condition can lead to heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

That statistic tremendously impacted me, and I decided to set in motion a series of changes to improve nutrition and increase physical activity levels at my campus. This year, our school enrolled in Michelle Obama's national initiative, Let's Move! Active Schools, which is designed to ensure students have the opportunity to be physically active before, during, and after school for at least 60 minutes a day.

Principals need to be champions for health and fitness. We need to lead by example, and we need to find ways to make physical activity accessible to all students and their families. Less than half of the nation's students meet current evidence-based guidelines of an hour of vigorous or moderate intensity physical activity daily, according to *Educating the Student Body: Taking Physical Activity and Physical Education to School*, a recent report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM). *Educating the Student Body* recommends that states require physical education as a core subject, as increasing physical activity helps students think faster and more clearly, and reach their academic potential.

I agree with the IOM's recommendations, and hope you will consider incorporating some of these initiatives that are working successfully at my school:

- **Provide free breakfast and lunch programs.** Our breakfast program decreased tardiness by 30 percent and helped the students settle themselves and focus. If money wasn't an issue, I'd stock refrigerators in classrooms with healthy snacks for young children. I think we'd see a big difference in their ability to be attentive, stay on task and not be distracted by that fact they may have not eaten since the night before!

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- **Work creatively with teachers and physical education teachers.** Encourage them to take leadership positions in the fitness activities that extend beyond physical education class time. Not every teacher can come early to school or stay late, but by taking turns, they can sign up for one morning or afternoon a week to supervise the gym or outdoor play space.
- **Monitor physical education programs.** Our field days are not competitive. No one gets a medal or ribbon. They're fun activities for all age levels. I also require 150 minutes of physical education a week. I only have one physical education teacher, but he uses a curriculum that allows other teachers to teach one physical education class a week.

Here's another important recommendation: Lead by example. I get up at 4:45 a.m. to work out four days a week. When I go to monthly principal meetings and look around the room, I see that my peers' health deteriorates rapidly after they become principals. They gain weight. They start to have health issues. For me, the simple act of

getting up earlier has positively impacted my health and attitude. I want people to know that if it's good for me, it's good for the kids, and it's good for their families. Part of the Let's Move! Active Schools plan is to foster community involvement. Here are two examples on how to do get started.

- My physical education teacher comes to the campus at 6 p.m. and opens the fitness trail for students, families, and community members to use. He also will help supervise and promote walking 20 minutes each morning prior to the beginning of the school day for students and families.
- The school has three family wellness nights a year. We have nutrition classes, open up the fitness trail, and do other fun activities to engage both students and their parents.

Nothing spells success like the transformation of one of our students. This particular student's doctor advised him to lose 20 pounds. He tried to do it by increasing exercise and riding a bike, but he hated it. But once he started walking on the fitness trail with his friends, he didn't see it as a chore. Since then, he has lost the 20 pounds. His mother also lost weight.

I hope that you, too, will become an advocate for the "whole-of-school approach" to physical activity where all members of the school take an active role. 📌

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HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author argues that principals need to be champions for health and fitness, setting a personal example for their school communities. How have you made a difference in the physical fitness of the students at your school? Share your thoughts on Twitter @naesp.