Combating Childhood Obesity: School Leadership Makes a Difference

Finding the time, among principals’ other pressing priorities, to promote school wellness.

An important first step in addressing any public health crisis is raising public awareness. However, getting everyone on board to help solve the underlying causes of that crisis is a daunting task. The childhood obesity epidemic poses such a challenge, particularly in terms of how to best engage and assist principals and other school leaders in creating healthier learning environments.

With so much emphasis on raising test scores, retaining good teachers, and managing squeezed budgets, how can a principal be expected to make headway with school wellness to improve nutrition and physical activity opportunities for all students? “What principal in America is not for good nutrition and fitness?” asks Ron Krause, principal of Brooks Middle School in Bolingbrook, Illinois. “Of course we all care about wellness. It’s fine to say that we should add something to help kids get in better physical shape and make healthier food choices. But our proverbial glass is already full, so what is going to give?”

Dealing With a “Full Glass”

This vexing dilemma of too many priorities and too little time was echoed in a recent report by Action for Healthy Kids that examined what’s working for and against school wellness. Indeed, competition from other pressing issues was cited as one of the biggest obstacles to creating healthier schools. Also uncovered in that report
were many other systemic barriers to widespread advances in school wellness, such as inadequate time in the school day to address core wellness needs, high costs of providing healthy foods and low school-meal reimbursement rates, and insufficient funding and staffing for physical education programs.

As we work to address these challenges, much is at stake. More than one-third of our schoolchildren already are either overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the past 30 years the percentage of overweight children ages 6 to 11 has nearly tripled and the percentage of overweight adolescents ages 12 to 19 has more than tripled.

Unhappy Consequences Await Many

Although many schools work to create a health-promoting environment for students, many of today's children are headed toward a future of potential negative health consequences. According to the CDC, overweight young people are much more likely than children of normal weight to become overweight or obese adults, with increased risk for associated adult health problems, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, several types of cancer, and osteoarthritis.

There are other troubling near-term consequences as well. According to a report titled “The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity,” children who are overweight are more likely to experience social discrimination, poor self-esteem, and depression.

On a more promising note, research shows that proper nutrition, physical activity, and physical fitness are associated with improved cognitive function, stronger academic achievement, increased concentration, and better test scores. Despite supportive evidence of the benefits, significant gaps remain in implementing of school wellness efforts. For example, according to the CDC's 2006 School Health Policies and Programs Study, very few schools provide daily physical education for all grades throughout the entire school year: just 4 percent of elementary schools, 8 percent of middle schools, and 2 percent of high schools.

Federal Mandate Is a Partial Solution

Recognizing the role that schools can play in preventing childhood obesity, Congress passed a mandate requiring most public school districts in the country to adopt a local wellness policy by July 2006 to promote student wellness, nutrition education, and physical activity. Unfortunately, this new law did not include funding, guidelines for implementation, or standards for monitoring and evaluating progress.

Undeterred by the lack of federal support, many states are stepping forward to assist schools in developing, implementing, and evaluating local wellness policies. Fortunately, these schools have made some progress by installing salad bars in cafeterias, providing healthier options through school vending, and creating walking clubs for students and staff, to name just a few examples. Action for Healthy Kids has played a supportive role in assisting many schools with such wellness enhancements.

As pointed out by Dr. David Satcher, former U.S. surgeon general and founding chair of Action for Healthy Kids, positive changes at local schools often can be attributed to the leadership and passion of a single individual. In many cases, that person is the school principal.

School Wellness Is a Continuum

“You've heard it said that when the principal sneezes, the whole school should get a cold,” says Krause. “Well, the same applies to the wellness issue. If we believe in the value of helping kids reach their full potential, then it’s really no stretch to see that student health is a part of that equation. The challenge is figuring out how to make it happen.”

Located about an hour outside of Chicago, Krause’s school serves a diverse, high-needs population of about 1,300 students. Krause says the school serves as a “safe haven” for many students. It provides more than just a basic classroom education, often addressing broader needs such as health and nutrition.

“It's painful to watch some of our kids try to get into a desk because they're so overweight. Sure we purchase special desks when we need to, but that's not addressing the underlying problem,” says Krause. “On the other side, we have kids who may not be obese but eat primarily potato chips and drink pop every day at home. We know for a fact these kids are getting their best meal of the day right here at school. We know that the better kids feel, the better they will perform in class.”

Although many challenges remain, Krause says that Brooks Middle School is “moving along the school wellness continuum,” always looking for creative ways to appeal to the interest and attention span of young students. For example, to generate excitement about fitness, Krause brought in a Chinese acrobatic troupe that

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provided a mesmerizing assembly for the entire student body and staff. Another school assembly featured a rap music group that communicated to students about the importance of good nutrition and health.

“It’s hard to know what really reaches kids with this message of taking care of yourself,” says Krause. “We just keep looking for opportunities to make light bulbs come on.”

Brooks Middle School also promotes wellness through its physical education leadership program. This effort seeks to involve students as leaders in conducting PE classes, through such roles as refereeing sports during class, leading calisthenics, and other physical activities. According to Krause, when students assist the teacher in leading class activities, all students get more value out of their PE time.

“School wellness is not just about improving the health of our kids, it has to involve the entire school community,” says Krause. “If we are simply compliant, that’s what we’re going to get from others. It’s my role to get people fired up and see themselves as part of the solution. No, it’s not easy, but that’s part of the burden and beauty of leadership. If all the answers are given to us, then you’ve taken the fun out of being a principal.”

Leadership and Teamwork

Cynthia Godfrey, principal of Lincoln Elementary School in Hudson, Michigan, is also making a good mark with her school wellness efforts. Godfrey’s approach of engaging staff to take ownership helped her school earn an outstanding achievement award from the Michigan Surgeon General’s Healthy School Environment Recognition Program.

“A number of peers have asked me how we found the time and other resources to make wellness improvements,” says Godfrey. “Understandably, principals are hesitant to set overly ambitious goals because they fear the workload may become unmanageable. I certainly relate to their concerns; however, good health is an important component for learning and growing and performing academically.”

Godfrey’s message to principals who see the need to improve wellness but worry about how to get
started: remember that many hands can help lighten the load. By sharing the workload and getting leadership involvement from staff, school wellness has become a core priority for the school.

Hudson is a rural community and traditionally has been athletically oriented, with excellent recreation programs. Despite local emphasis on physical activity, several student health indicators began to decline as evidenced by student fitness screenings and low participation in school athletics.

Getting the Right People Involved

“Given the seriousness of our challenge, as a school district we formed a school health committee comprised of our curriculum director, school counselors, food service personnel, the school nurse, health and physical education teachers, administration, and communities in schools director,” says Godfrey. “We also recruited parents, community leaders, and experts in nutrition, health, and fitness. We were fortunate also that our district superintendent was very supportive.”

With resources from the Michigan Action for Healthy Kids Team and the Michigan Coordinated School Health Leadership Institute, Godfrey’s committee instituted numerous changes, including a revamped cafeteria menu and more frequent PE classes, along with the very successful Walk to School program. Godfrey attributed much of her team’s success to communication.

Keeping the Community Informed

“We make sure that our entire community is well informed of our wellness activities,” says Godfrey. “First and foremost, we keep in close touch with parents. They want to know, and need to know, what is going on. We use the local media and also conduct workshops to explain our policies and programs and to respond to parent concerns.”

Godfrey admits that there can be sizeable obstacles that hinder wellness, such as finances, uncooperative staff, or inadequate facilities. Nevertheless, she and her committee have made progress in creating a school where healthy choices and healthy behaviors are becoming the norm.

“In our experience, people’s attitudes toward changes have been remarkably positive, and shifting toward a healthier school culture has come more easily than any of us expected,” said Godfrey. “I attribute that in large measure to our team approach, adopting guiding principles of full disclosure and open, ongoing communications with the community about the importance of addressing the needs of the whole child.”

Do It for Your Students

If not addressed, physical inactivity and poor nutrition habits among today’s youths will have long-lasting negative consequences for our children, schools, communities, and society at large.

The good news is that public awareness about the perils of childhood obesity is growing. Enlightened leaders from all sectors of society are beginning to step forward and drive change. Most encouraging are principals and other leaders who have a personal vision and passion for healthy schools, and who understand that student performance can be enhanced through these efforts.

Rob Biscegli is executive director of Action for Healthy Kids. His e-mail address is rob@actionforhealthykids.org.