Healthy Eating and Physical Activity: Make a Difference at Your School

A school climate that promotes a healthy lifestyle can make a big difference in the lives of students.

by Terrence P. O’Toole and Sarah M. Lee

Physical activity and eating behaviors of youths are influenced by many sectors of society, including families, community organizations, health care providers, faith-based institutions, businesses, government agencies, the media, and schools. While educators cannot solve the obesity epidemic on their own, the habits that contribute to obesity are unlikely to change without strong, school-based programs and policies.

Healthier students are also better students. Emerging research documents connections between academic performance and physical activity, good nutrition, and high-quality physical education and nutrition programs (Dwyer et al., 2001; Kleinman et al., 2002; Sallis et al., 1999; Taras, 2005a; Taras, 2005b; Taras & Potts-Datema, 2005).

Ten Strategies for a Healthy School Climate

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified 10 strategies that educators can implement to prevent obesity by promoting physical activity and healthy eating. The CDC and its partners have developed easy-to-use tools that can help you effectively implement each of these strategies in your school.

Strategy 1: Address physical activity and nutrition through a coordinated school-health program (CSHP). A CSHP can provide a systematic approach to promoting student health and learning through multiple components such as health education, physical education, and healthy school meals. Active coordination is needed to engage school staff; implement district and school priority actions; assess programs and policies; create a plan based on data, sound science, and analysis of gaps and redundancies in existing health programming; establish goals; and evaluate efforts. The CDC’s Division of Adolescent and School Health Web site has many resources to help with implementing such a program.

Strategy 2: Maintain an active school-health council and designate a school-health coordinator. Establishing school-health councils at the district level and school-health teams at the school level is an effective way to achieve an enduring focus on promoting physical activity and healthy eating. A school-health council or team is composed of a core group of educators, staff, parents, and community members who provide advice and support on all aspects of the school-health program. The American Cancer Society’s publication, Promoting Healthy Youth, Schools and Communities: A Guide to Community-School Health Councils (Shirer, 2003), offers a practical, five-step approach to developing, maintaining, and evaluating school-health councils.

Strategy 3: Assess the school’s health policies and programs and develop a plan for improvement. Self-assessment and planning provide structure to a school-health program in the way that a map provides guidance to a driver. The self-assessment describes where the
program is now and the plan provides the destination and directions to make improvements. The CDC’s School Health Index is an easy-to-use self-assessment and planning tool that allows users to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their school’s health policies, programs, and services and then establish priorities for improvement.

**Strategy 4: Strengthen the school’s nutrition and physical activity policies.** School policies can dictate how often students attend physical education, which items go into school vending machines, which topics and skills are taught in health education, and which foods are served in the cafeteria. *Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn: A School Health Policy Guide* is a good source of information on how to establish strong health policies.

**Strategy 5: Implement a high-quality, health-promotion program for school staff.** Staff wellness programs provide opportunities for staff members to participate in health assessments, nutrition classes, physical activity programs, and other health-promotion activities. These opportunities can contribute to improvements in physical- and mental-health outcomes; increases in morale, productivity, and positive role modeling; and decreases in absenteeism and health insurance costs. *Protecting Our Assets: A School Employee Wellness Guide* focuses on how to develop a comprehensive school employee wellness program.

**Strategy 6: Implement a high-quality course of study in health education.** The National Health Education Standards (Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards, 2007) provide a framework for aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices for quality health education.

**Strategy 7: Implement a high-quality course of study in physical education.** This involves a daily, planned, and sequential physical education curriculum and instruction from kindergarten through grade 12 that is consistent with national standards for physical education. The CDC’s *Physical Education Curriculum Analysis Tool* enables educators to evaluate their physical education program based on the extent to which it aligns with national standards, guidelines, and best practices for quality, physical education programs.

**Strategy 8: Increase opportunities for students to engage in physical activity.** The school setting offers multiple opportunities for all students, not just those who are athletically inclined, to enjoy physical activity outside of physical education classes. These opportunities might include walking to and from school, physical-activity clubs, intramural sports programs, and having classroom lessons that incorporate physical activity. Resources include the National Association for Sport and Physical Education’s Guidelines for After School Physical Activity Programs and Intramural Sports Programs.

**Strategy 9: Implement a quality meals program.** School meals have a substantial impact on the nutritional quality of students’ overall dietary intake and provide a valuable opportunity for students to learn about good nutrition. The CDC supports the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s efforts to ensure that meals served through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program are safe, nutritious, and balanced. *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment* provides guidance and ready-to-use resources designed to help educators implement a comprehensive approach to promoting healthy eating.

**Strategy 10: Ensure that students have appealing, healthy choices in foods and beverages offered outside of the school’s meals program.** Most schools offer food and beverages to students through a variety of channels outside of the federally regulated school-meals program (e.g., vending machines, school stores, parties, etc.). These offerings have
dramatically increased student access to high-fat, high-sodium snacks and non-nutritious, high-calorie beverages. **Making It Happen: School Nutrition Success Stories** describes six strategies that schools have implemented to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages offered on campus.

Most schools have implemented some of the recommended strategies, but more can be done to promote physical activity and healthy eating. While it is not realistic to make improvements in each area simultaneously, educators can prioritize which strategies to implement first based on their unique needs and strengths. In doing so, they will be creating a climate in which students can attain optimal health and increase academic potential by providing them with the skills, resources, and environment needed to adopt long-term physical activity and healthy eating behaviors.

For a detailed explanation of the strategies and tools mentioned in this article, go to [www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/keystategies/pdf/make-a-difference.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/keystategies/pdf/make-a-difference.pdf).

**References**


Taras, H. L., & Potts-Datema, W. Obesity and student performance at school. *Journal of School Health, 75*(8), 291-295.

**Terrence P. O’Toole** and **Sarah M. Lee** are health scientists in the Division of Adolescent and School Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. O’Toole and Lee can be reached at ewu9@cdc.gov.