A Coordinated Approach to Health and Learning

By coordinating many existing programs and resources, schools can better provide for the health and safety of their students and staffs.

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Many children today are coming to school too sick, hungry, tired, or afraid to benefit from educational opportunities. Chronic health conditions, such as asthma and diabetes, result in many lost school days and fear of bullying keeps some children away from school or in a constant state of anxiety.
Benefits of a Coordinated School Health Program

Research studies have shown that many components of CSHPs can positively affect health and academic outcomes. For example:

- School breakfast programs can improve student concentration and reduce behavior problems.
- Physical education programs help students learn behaviors that can keep them fit for life. Physical activity also has been associated with higher academic performance, increased self-esteem, and lower anxiety and stress levels.
- Teachers in schools with employee wellness programs are absent less often and have higher morale.

Lloyd Kolbe (2002, 2005), former director of the Division of Adolescent and School Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has identified four areas that a CSHP can benefit: improved health knowledge, attitudes, and skills; improved health behaviors and outcomes; improved educational outcomes; and improved social outcomes.

CSHPs can save money, too. Reduced employee absenteeism decreases the need for substitute pay and some health insurers discount insurance premiums for employers who offer wellness or health promotion programs for staff. Also, when student attendance improves, schools receive increased funding in states where pupil days are the basis for allocations.

What Principals Can Do

Many elementary schools already have these elements of a CSHP in place:

- Lessons about safety, substance abuse prevention, nutrition, physical activity, and other health topics;
- Nutritious school meals and snacks;
- Nonsmoking policies;
- School nurses;
- Traffic patterns that increase students’ safety;
- Counseling services; and
- Outreach to parents and the community.

All too often, however, these activities function independently, sometimes duplicating one another, and are not integrated into the school’s overall program. In a coordinated program, a team works with an administrator to ensure communication, cooperation, and maximum use of available resources. Together, they identify needs and existing resources, plan and implement activities and services, and celebrate successes.

Every school has its own unique characteristics, strengths, and challenges. Health-related issues in urban areas are likely to differ from those in suburban or rural schools, and some have more health-related activities in place than others. Regardless of the special circumstances a school faces, principals can take a number of steps to implement a CSHP.

Examine your school’s vision or mission statement. Does it include a reference to the link between health and learning or preparing students to live healthy lives?

Designate a program coordinator. This might be a health educator, a physical education specialist, a school nurse, a classroom teacher, or anyone who is energetic, respected by staff, and, most importantly, committed to promoting the well-being of students and staff. In some schools, principals themselves have chosen to assume this role.

Organize a school health team that includes an administrator and representatives of CSHP components, students, families, teachers, and community organizations.

Demonstrate your support by promoting and engaging in school health activities. Help to make the school community aware of opportunities to improve their well-being by including references to health-related activities in daily announcements, and offering health-related professional development for teachers and other staff.
**Identify existing school resources** that address health as well as unmet health needs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has developed the School Health Index ([www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/shi](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/shi)) to help elementary schools assess their school health activities. The Healthy School Report Card (Lohrmann 2005) is another tool for assessing your school’s practices, identifying and prioritizing changes you can make, and incorporating those changes into your school improvement plan.

**Develop a plan.** A CSHP is not a one-time activity. Set realistic short- and long-term objectives based on what you have learned from your assessment, and decide how and when you will achieve them in the context of your school improvement plan.

**Monitor how things are going.** What is working? What can you do better? Use what you learn to make needed changes.

**Acknowledge accomplishments.** Recognize individuals and groups that are making your school a healthier, safer environment in which to work and learn.

Cindy Adkins, principal of Blue Lick Elementary School in Louisville, Kentucky, demonstrates school health leadership by exercising six days a week and watching what she eats. Her school conducts fitness assessments of students in the spring and fall, telecasts health tips, offers healthier food choices, and promotes extracurricular physical activities.

Because elementary schools reach more young people than any other social institution (other than families), they are well positioned to lay the foundation for students’ success in school and in life. The need for a coordinated approach to health and learning is greater now than ever before. In fulfilling their primary responsibility to foster an environment conducive to learning, principals cannot afford to neglect the health and safety of their students and staff.

**References**


**WEB RESOURCES**

The Council of Chief State School Officers provides a link to state education agencies that offer technical assistance, resource materials, and professional development. [www.ccsso.org](http://www.ccsso.org)

The Association for State and Territorial Health Officials offers a similar link for state and territorial health agencies. [www.astho.org](http://www.astho.org)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s School Health Index is a tool for assessing and planning school health activities. [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/shi](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/shi)

Action for Healthy Kids provides state-by-state access to policies, plans, and resources for improving school nutrition and physical activity. [www.actionforhealthykids.org](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org)

The National Association of State Boards of Education’s “Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn” offers policy suggestions and references for promoting physical activity, nutrition, tobacco avoidance, sun safety, and asthma management in schools. [www.nasbe.org](http://www.nasbe.org)

**WEB RESOURCES**

The National School Boards Association has a school health resource database. [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org)

“Making the Connection” is a PowerPoint presentation that documents the links between coordinated school health programs and academic success with supporting references. [www.thesociety.org](http://www.thesociety.org)

Health, Mental Health, and Safety Guidelines for Schools is a compendium that draws on other published guidelines to recommend policies and practices for implementing quality school health and safety programs, as well as overall coordination of these programs. [www.nationalguidelines.org](http://www.nationalguidelines.org)

The American Academy of Pediatrics, American School Health Association, and National Association of School Nurses have resources and positions or resolutions on various school health and safety issues. [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) [www.ashaweb.org](http://www.ashaweb.org) [www.nasn.org](http://www.nasn.org)

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