As waistlines continue to expand among children and adults and type 2 diabetes continues to rise, it is time for principals to focus attention on ensuring that children are not only prepared to learn, but are physically able to perform at their best.

When combined with a healthy diet, just 60 minutes a day of moderate physical activity can help children control weight gain.

Jane D. Wargo

Concerned by the rise in obesity and type 2 diabetes in the United States, particularly among children, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports is undertaking a major effort to promote physical exercise and activity. This article provides some examples of how principals and schools can help, including participation in the President’s Challenge awards programs.
Although the benefits of physical activity have long been known—from lowering blood pressure and controlling weight to improving mood and bone health—Americans remain a largely sedentary culture. Two in three adults do not get the 30 minutes of moderate daily activity needed for health benefits, and 75 percent of adolescents did not meet that standard in 2003 (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services 2005).

The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (PCPFS) is working to reverse this trend. Formed in 1956 by President Eisenhower in response to a report that American youths were less fit than their European counterparts, the Council has served as a catalyst in promoting physical exercise and activity. Here are some examples of how principals and schools can help.

**Promote walking and bicycling.** Did you walk or bike to school as a child? Although suburban sprawl and concerns about safety have taken away those opportunities for many children, there are people and communities who realize the multiple benefits of walking and bicycling to school. The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center created the U.S. International Walk to School Web site (www.walktoschool-usa.org), which provides information about the Safe Routes to Schools program and other projects communities have undertaken to promote walking and bicycling to school.

**Provide enhanced physical education.** The Task Force on Community Preventive Services found that enhanced physical education classes improve children’s fitness levels (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001). An enhanced physical education class is one that increases the amount of time kids are active during PE class by either extending class time or increasing the amount of time kids are active in the class, such as altering traditional games to give more children a chance to participate instead of waiting for their turn.

**Be a role model.** There are hundreds of individual or group physical activities and sports in which you can serve as a role model for your students and staff. The benefits from physical activity can be realized at any age and, as the leader of your school, your efforts to increase your activity can affect the health of students and teachers alike.

When Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee decided to turn his life around in 2003 after being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes—traditionally associated with obese adults but increasingly diagnosed in children—he began exercising with a combination of activities that included walking, running, riding...
a stationary bike, and lifting weights. In 12 months he lost 105 pounds and was pronounced free of signs of diabetes.

Huckabee is using his platform as chairman of the National Governors Association to share his story and help others. Through his Healthy America initiative, he is bringing together public and private organizations in an effort to make communities, workplaces, and schools healthier.

Take the President’s Challenge. Engage children early in regular physical activity and provide them with a variety of activities and sports. Through the President’s Challenge awards programs, the PCPFS motivates children and adults to be active and earn presidential recognition for their efforts.

One of these programs is the Presidential Active Lifestyle Award (PALA), a six-week program that encourages participation in activities ranging from fishing to yoga and gardening. Anyone aged 6 and older can participate by creating an interactive log online (www.presidentschallenge.org), engaging in a minimum amount of activity (30 minutes for adults and 60 minutes for children 6–17) five days a week, and logging their progress. While the President’s Challenge physical fitness test remains an integral part of the Council’s efforts, the PALA serves as a way for PE teachers and others to encourage regular, lifelong physical activity, and prepare students to take the physical fitness test.

Seek activity-related partnerships. Some organizations have partnered with the President’s Challenge to produce unique physical activity programs for children. For example, the General Mills Foundation has a program to encourage students in 65 Minneapolis public schools to be physically active at least five days a week, 60 minutes a day, for six weeks. More than 20,000 students participated in the program during the 2004–2005 school year and General Mills gave each child who completed the program a patch and certificate.

Another example of creative partnering allowed students in Fairfax County, Virginia, to learn a new lifetime activity through a program made possible by a partnership with Snowsports Industries America. The goal of the Winter Feels Good program was to introduce snowshoeing and snow sports to the students, and show them how easy and fun it can be to be active during the winter months. Two thousand students formally participated in the program last winter and another 3,000 students received informal snowshoe instruction.

Encourage interest in the outdoors. America has millions of acres of public lands in all 50 states and more than 2,000 miles of rivers to enjoy and explore. This is why the PCPFS is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Indian Health Service, U.S. Department of Transportation, and U.S. land management agencies to promote public lands for public health. An offshoot of this work is the partnership between the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest...
Service, and the Outdoor Industry Foundation. Together, they developed Get Fit With US, a public awareness campaign to motivate individuals and families to take advantage of the closeness and availability of America’s public lands.

Physical activity on public lands isn’t limited to traditional activities like hiking or camping. Volunteer conservation activities also get people moving. Researchers at the CDC found that those who volunteer on environmental projects (e.g., trail maintenance, planting trees) are almost three times as likely to meet the physical activity recommendation (30 minutes, five or more days per week) compared to people who do not volunteer for these types of projects (Librett et al. 2005).

Science has proved that physical activity is beneficial to physical and mental health. What is less clear is how we motivate children—and adults—to engage in a regular program of physical activity. We hope that this sampling of proven programs and ideas will help you in your efforts to develop healthier, lifelong learners.

References


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WEB RESOURCES

The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports describes how you can start a physical activity program and earn presidential awards.

www.fitness.gov

The President’s Challenge is a physical activity and fitness awards program for children, adolescents, adults, and seniors.

www.presidentschallenge.org

The U.S. Department of the Interior lists recreation sites and activities in all 50 states.

www.recreation.gov

SPARK (Sports, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids) offers a variety of enhanced physical education programs.

www.sparkpe.org

Coca-Cola Congratulates the 2004 Winners of the NATIONAL SCHOOL AND BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS AWARD

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