

Progress or Promises?

What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools



Executive Summary

About Action for Healthy Kids

A public-private partnership of more than 60 national organizations and government agencies representing education, health, fitness, and nutrition, Action for Healthy Kids addresses the epidemic of overweight, sedentary, and undernourished youth by focusing on changes in schools to improve nutrition and increase physical activity. More than 10,000 volunteer educators, health professionals, school administrators, parents, and others take action at the national, state, school district, and school building levels through Action for Healthy Kids Teams in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Acknowledgments

Action for Healthy Kids draws upon the expertise and contributions of numerous national organizations, government agencies, Action for Healthy Kids Teams, and individuals committed to creating schools that promote sound nutrition and physical activity. The following members of Action for Healthy Kids Partner organizations, Team leaders, and other experts provided valuable support and guidance, information, and critical review for this report:

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School wellness — the belief that schools can and must promote and encourage healthy eating, physical activity, and nutrition and physical education as part of the solution to the childhood obesity epidemic — is an issue that impacts and engages a variety of stakeholders who have a role in leading, advocating for, and implementing wellness initiatives.

This report presents current perspectives of these stakeholder groups — school administrators, parents, educators, nutrition and health professionals, wellness advocates, federal and local government agencies, community groups, school board members, students, and others — on the progress that has been made and the gaps that still exist. It is being published to provide a snapshot of the state of school wellness after more than five years of work by Action for Healthy Kids, and others, at the national, state, and grassroots levels.

In preparing this report, Action for Healthy Kids assessed on-the-ground achievements large and small; examined initiatives in place and changes effected; and carefully evaluated the tasks remaining. We also undertook two efforts to obtain new information. First, we conducted research with stakeholders throughout the nation. And second, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with a group of authorities from the education and health fields — professionals whose experiences touch on the complex issues involved in achieving school wellness.

The situation.

A growing body of evidence indicates that poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and obesity are associated with lower student achievement. These factors also contribute to many health problems and set chil-

dren up for poor health throughout their lives — at a cost to them, their communities, and society.

Beyond the issue of excess calories, concern exists about poor nutritional quality, which leads to nutrient deficiencies that can affect learning and health and contribute to common illnesses such as flu, not to mention a range of chronic diseases. Furthermore, research indicates that physical education and regular physical activity can improve students' ability to learn by enhancing concentration skills and classroom behavior. Healthy kids make better students, and healthy kids make better communities. Bottom line: it is in schools' interest to help provide healthy, active environments.

The good news.

Over the last five years, Action for Healthy Kids and many others have elevated awareness at all levels about the importance of nutrition and physical activity, and spearheaded new initiatives in schools and communities across the country. In concert with other organizations, we have taken important steps — large and small — toward addressing the childhood obesity crisis.

From the innovative activities of Action for Healthy Kids' Teams to the fact that school wellness is now a subject of national dialogue and focus, there is cause for optimism. And the passage of federal legislation mandating local wellness policies —



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a response by Congress to the alarming surge in childhood obesity by identifying a key role for schools in its prevention — will be looked back upon as perhaps the launching pad for the school wellness movement.

Despite accomplishments and the welcomed addition of school wellness on the radar screen, troubling gaps exist. If the goal of creating a healthy, active environment at school for all American children is indeed to become reality, these gaps must be closed.

Gaps in perception.

Action for Healthy Kids' research shows that superintendents, school board members, teachers, school nutrition personnel, parents, community health professionals, and even students diverge significantly — not only in how they view the issue of school wellness, but in how they interpret the effectiveness of efforts to address it. Those charged with school governance and leadership roles tend to be much more optimistic than those with day-to-day school wellness implementation responsibilities. Until these stakeholder perceptions are more closely aligned, supported by meaningful data from district- and statewide monitoring efforts, progress in advancing the current state of school wellness will likely be affected.

Gaps in attention and access to healthy food choices — and in improving nutritional quality.

Most of the attention to improving school nutrition has focused on foods and beverages to avoid — that is, nutrients of which youth should have less. This focus has left missed opportunities to improve the quality of foods and beverages at school. Schools have achieved mixed results

in creating healthy, appealing school meals, the source of most nutrition at school. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Agriculture determined that school meal programs had improved their nutritional content since the mid-1990s, but many offerings still lack tasty, youth-appealing fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free and low-fat milk and milk products.

Add to this picture the availability of unhealthy food options through vending machines, school stores, and snack bars, and there is little wonder why youth continue to consume inadequate nutrients in the school environment. As long as schools provide access to unhealthy, low-nutrient food options, kids are likely to continue to choose them.

A further hurdle preventing youth from consuming nutrient-rich foods is their simple lack of interest in doing so. This hurdle seems especially challenging given that many stakeholders, kids included, believe that schools offer limited access to tasty and appealing healthful food options.

Removing high-density, low-nutrient foods from schools must be a continuing priority; however, the nutritional quality of all foods in the overall school environment — and the need to engage and educate youth in making better food choices — must also be key parts of the solution.

Gaps in physical education and school-based physical activity opportunities.

There is general consensus among national education, health, and medical organizations that quality, daily physical activity can be a beneficial component in addressing childhood overweight and obesity. Moreover,

evidence shows that children who are physically active and fit tend to perform better in the classroom, and that daily physical education does not negatively affect academic performance.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that children engage in at least 60 minutes of age-appropriate physical activity most or all days of the week, but few children meet these recommendations. Unfortunately, insufficient funding and staffing for physical education programs have cut physical education from school schedules. Few schools provide daily physical education for all students, and only about seven in ten elementary school children have recess every day. Equally troubling, participation in physical education declines as students progress through school.

Gaps in policy implementation.

Although the federal wellness policy mandate was an essential and potent lever for engaging state education agencies and local districts, it represents just a first step. Many school districts across the nation do indeed have policies in place, and nearly 70 percent of those policies do meet the minimum federal requirements. However, there are many shortcomings in both policy content and implementation. For example, fewer than half of local wellness policies have requirements for physical education staff certification or development. A similar gap exists in the food-service arena, where fewer than 30 percent of states offer school nutrition directors and food service managers state licensure, certification, or endorsement. Importantly, a review of local wellness policies by Action for Healthy Kids in fall of 2006 showed

that the majority did not fully address policy implementation and evaluation.

Gaps in policy monitoring and evaluation.

Tracking of local wellness policy implementation is as important as development of the policy itself, yet monitoring and evaluation are not given the attention necessary, and in many districts are virtually nonexistent. It is particularly telling that so far only one state — Kansas — has enacted ongoing monitoring of wellness policies, reflecting a shortcoming in nationwide efforts to create healthy learning environments. Clearly, effective systems for monitoring and evaluating policy implementation would enable stakeholders to more accurately assess progress, and, importantly, develop and improve ongoing, targeted intervention strategies.

Gaps in interest and in perceived responsibilities.

While there is broad agreement that children's physical inactivity and poor nutrition are important public health concerns, many schools — and administrators and educators within those schools — do not view students' health and wellness as part of their core mission. Given the other pressing priorities that schools must address, not all educators see promoting students' nutrition and physical activity as part of their job. This is a disconnect that we must recognize, and continue to address.

One promising approach in school wellness is weaving physical activity and healthful eating into the fabric of the school culture — for students as well as school staff. Wellness advocates agree that, to effect significant change, wellness needs to be integrated within the overall school

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improvement plan — and traditionally, it is not. Can schools ever be community centers for lifelong learning, in which lessons about and practices supporting better nutrition and physical activity are a key part? Some authorities suggest they must.

Gaps in parent engagement.

Although there is growing concern among many parents and adult caregivers about the effects of poor nutrition, inactivity, and obesity, this concern has not consistently translated into meaningful engagement with schools.

Research indicates that schools are not getting much support from parents when it comes to encouraging children to be physically active every day or to consume healthful foods and beverages. Potentially contributing to this situation is the fact that neither parents, nor school health professionals, nor community health providers feel that schools are providing adequate information to parents on the importance of daily physical activity or sound nutrition — even if they recognize that schools alone should not bear this responsibility.

Research further indicates that although they care deeply about their children’s health and well-being, parents often feel ill-equipped to support schools’ wellness efforts. Evidence further suggests that parents, including those in underserved communities, are interested in serving as wellness advocates, but they often don’t know enough about the wellness climate and processes within their schools to take specific actions.

We need more creative solutions for engaging parents in improving school wellness policies and practices — and for reinforcing healthy eating and physical activity habits at home.

Gaps in addressing underserved communities.

The environments in which many American children live do not make it easy for them to engage in healthy behaviors. This is especially true for children in underserved and high-risk areas who have been hit hard with multiple health disparities. Poor nutrition and physical inactivity exact a disproportionate impact on low-income communities, which experience a higher incidence of undernourished, sedentary, and overweight youth and over-burdened school systems.

Fueling the problem in disadvantaged communities is that many children and stressed families face other factors that compound unhealthy environmental influences, such as a lack of resources for both nutritious foods and physical activity; a lack of nearby grocery stores where they can buy fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain foods, fat-free and low-fat dairy products; outdoor environments that are unsafe for physical activity; and a lack of access to physical activity programs due to both financial disparities and transportation issues.

These are facts of concern to all Americans, with their serious implications relative to learning, health, productivity, economics, and equity.

Gaps in systemic support.

Authorities interviewed for this report suggest we are entering a phase of the school wellness journey where the more challenging systemic hurdles now have to be surmounted — the resource-intensive ones that cost money. For example, many schools simply are not equipped to encourage or accommodate a commitment to school wellness. School priorities

such as testing take precedence over virtually every other concern. This is compounded by inadequate time in the school day to address core wellness needs. Further, a shortage of physical education teachers and lack of funding for basic equipment pose significant barriers for both physical education classes and other school-based physical activity programs.

In parallel, school food services are strained on multiple fronts. Food-service staff may not be adequately trained and often are poorly paid. Yet they are charged with the responsibility of feeding thousands of children per meal with minimal budgets and limited time and facilities — all directly impacting the quality of meals. Schools tend to make up budgetary shortfalls by offering popular but mostly low-nutrient competitive foods that do not meet USDA nutritional requirements. And as food prices continue to rise, the challenges are exacerbated.

The urgent need for change.

Action for Healthy Kids believes that a healthy future for America's schoolchildren largely hinges on bridging these gaps. The challenges enumerated here represent an urgent "to do" list for the foreseeable future, not only for our organization, but for others who share in this commitment. Addressing these gaps is part of the necessary process that leads to progress.

Real change has begun, and more is within reach. Short- and long-range realities alike demand policy, environmental, and behavioral change, as well as expanded communication and outreach. But longer-term issues involve effecting systemic change — creating incentive

structures for school leaders, health professionals, and states; re-thinking the funding and purchasing patterns of school meals; solving of complex issues of school-day scheduling; and, of course, working diligently to uncover further funding to support critical school wellness efforts.

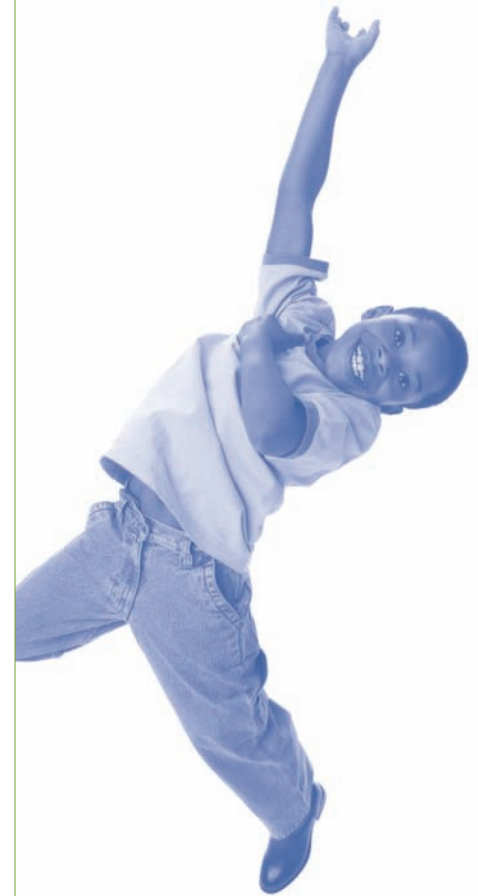
The bottom line is that, to fulfill the mandate of school wellness, change is still needed at all levels of the education system — building, district, state, national — and among a wide range of stakeholders — school administrators, educators, school staff, parents, students, community, and other decision-makers. Schools cannot do it alone, and, to tackle wellness, they need broad, specific, and continuing support from all sides and all constituencies.

Action for Healthy Kids as convener and catalyst.

Action for Healthy Kids realizes that we must also contribute more. Our next five years will be marked by close collaboration with stakeholders in a committed effort to accelerate change in American schools. That commitment will take the form of a redoubled focus on schools in underserved communities; an emphasis on helping more parents become wellness advocates; a commitment to promoting nutritional quality; working to ensure adequate physical activity opportunities for students; closer collaboration with school leaders; and support for wellness policy monitoring and evaluation.

With clarity of vision and consistency of mission, Action for Healthy Kids will continue to work to uncover, encourage, and channel the leadership necessary in effecting change — and support that leadership with vital information, tools, and insights. ✨

Research results, reports, and many other references touched on in this report can be accessed in greater detail at Action for Healthy Kids' website, www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.



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