

Schools Can Play a Role in Preventing Childhood Obesity

Schools are one of the primary locations for reaching the nation's children and youth. In 2000, 53.2 million students were enrolled in public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Research suggests that children today are spending more of their time away from home in school, after-school programs, or daycare. Both inside and outside of the classroom, schools present opportunities for students to learn about healthful eating habits and regular physical activity; engage in physical education; and make food and physical activity choices during school meal times and through school-related activities. Several large-scale school-based intervention studies demonstrate that changes in the school food environment can impact students' dietary choices and improve the quality of their diets while at school.

Food and Beverages in Schools

All food and beverages sold or served to students in school should be healthful and meet an accepted nutritional content standard. However, many of the "competitive foods" now sold in school cafeterias, vending machines, school stores, and school fundraisers are typically high in calories and low in nutritional value. At present, only minimal federal standards exist for the sale of competitive foods in schools.

Federal School Meal Programs

Traditionally, school cafeterias have offered the federally subsidized school meals that are required to meet defined nutritional standards. Each school day approximately 28 million school-aged children participate in the National School Lunch Program and an estimated 8 million children participate in the School Breakfast Program. Participation in these programs is highest among students approved to receive free meals as compared with students receiving reduced-price meals or students paying full price. Schools, school districts, and state educational agencies need to ensure that all meals served or sold in schools are in compliance with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Additionally, schools should focus on improving food quality in the school meal programs. Increasing the availability of whole-grain foods, low-fat milk, and fresh local produce will

not only be more healthful for participating students, but has the potential to attract greater participation.

Competitive Foods

More recently, "competitive foods"—foods and beverages served or sold that are not part of the federal school meal programs—are being offered in schools. These foods represent a significant share of the available foods that students purchase and consume at

KEY FACTS

Schools should provide a consistent environment that is conducive to healthful eating behaviors and regular physical activity.

Develop and implement nutritional standards for all competitive foods and beverages sold or served in schools.

Ensure that all school meals meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Ensure that all children and youth participate in a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity during the school day, including expanded opportunities for physical activity through classes, sports programs, clubs, lessons, after-school and community use of school facilities, and walking- and biking to-school program.

Enhance school health curricula (including developing innovative approaches to teaching and staffing) and the use of school health services for obesity prevention efforts;

Ensure that schools are as advertising-free as possible.

Conduct annual assessments of students' weight, height, and body mass index and make that information available to parents.

Assess school policies and practices related to nutrition, physical activity, and obesity prevention.

school, particularly high schools, and are typically high in fat or sugar and low in nutrients. Regulation for these foods is minimal, although 21 states have policies that restrict competitive foods beyond federal regulations. New policies are needed to ensure that foods available at schools are consistent with current nutritional guidelines and to support students in making healthy food choices.

School Meal Funding and Sales of Competitive Foods

School nutrition programs are financially self-supporting and must generate sufficient revenues to pay for staff, food, and equipment. To generate funds needed to function, school food services often sell competitive foods. The current federal funding structure and the policies and practices of selling competitive foods should be examined for improvements that would encourage students to consume nutritious foods and beverages.

Schools That Allow Food Promotion or Advertising

	Total Schools (%)
Soft drink contracts:	
Have contract with company to sell soft drinks	Elementary schools: 38.2 Middle/junior high schools: 50.4 Senior high schools: 71.9
Of schools with soft drink contracts:	
Receive a specific percentage of soft drink sale receipts	91.7
Receive sales incentives from company ^a	Elementary schools: 24.0 Middle/junior high schools: 40.9 Senior high schools: 56.7
Allow advertising by the company in the school building	37.6
Allow advertising by the company on school grounds	27.7
Allow advertising by the company on school buses	2.2
Promotion of candy, meals from fast food restaurants, and soft drinks:	
Allow promotion of these products through coupons	23.3
Allow promotion of these products through sponsorship of school events	14.3
Allow promotion of these products through school publications	7.7
Prohibit or discourage faculty and staff from using these items as rewards	24.8

Table 1. Schools receive incentives such as cash awards or donations of equipment or supplies once receipts reach specified amounts
SOURCE: Wechsler et al., 2001.

Physical Activity

Many schools around the nation have reduced the commitment to provide students with regular and adequate physical activity, even though it is recommended that children accumulate a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily. A 2000 survey found that only 8.0 percent of elementary schools, 6.4 percent of middle/junior high schools and 5.8 percent of senior high schools provided daily physical education (PE) for the entire school year for all of the students in each grade. Participation is especially low for high school students. Schools should ensure that all children and youth participate in a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity during the school day. Furthermore, physical activity opportunities available through the school should be expanded, including intramural and interscholastic sports programs, and other physical activity clubs, programs and lessons that meet the needs and interests of all students.

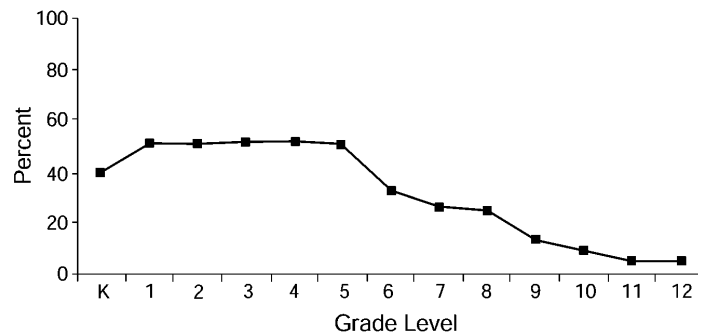


Figure 1. Percentage of Schools that Require Physical Education, by Grade. SHPPS 2000.
SOURCE: Burgeson et al., 2001.

Other Areas for Improvement

Schools offer many other opportunities for learning and practicing healthful eating and physical activity behaviors. Coordinated changes in the classroom curriculum, the in-school advertising environment, school health services, and after-school programs all offer the potential to advance obesity prevention efforts. Schools can also assist parents by collecting and explaining information related to their child's weight status.