

Making Schools the Model for Healthier Environments Toolkit

What It Is

This toolkit provides information to help make schools the model for healthier environments, and will provide tools and resources to help ensure that school environments become the standard for healthy eating and active living. The information provided will offer promising solutions to problems that schools face in providing healthy food and opportunities for physical activity.

Background

Healthy students perform better. Poor nutrition and inadequate physical activity can affect not only academic achievement, but also other factors such as absenteeism, classroom behavior, ability to concentrate, self-esteem, cognitive performance, and test scores.¹

An estimated 30 percent of children ages 10-17 are overweight or obese.² From preschool through 12th grade, schools can make a significant contribution to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by enacting policies that promote the availability and consumption of nutritious foods and beverages, provide opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day, and encourage healthy habits that can last a lifetime.

Every five years Congress revisits the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act in an effort to improve federally funded child nutrition programs, which include the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP).³ In step with President Obama's pledge to end childhood obesity and childhood hunger within a generation, the programs are part of a government-led strategy to safeguard low-income children's access to healthy food. The NSLP program feeds approximately 30.5 million children each school day.⁴ In 2008 schools served more than 5 billion lunches with more than half available for free—for children whose households were at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line—or offered at a reduced rate through the NSLP.⁵

Currently, school meals must meet standards established in 1995; however, advances have been made in dietary guidance in the years since. The Institute of Medicine released a report in 2009 providing recommendations to revise standards and requirements so that school meals are more healthful.⁶ In addition to pushing for updated standards for school meals, policymakers and advocates have worked diligently to identify other effective policy considerations to make schools the model for healthy learning environments. Some of these strategies include eliminating competitive foods on school campuses, implementing physical activity guidelines in

local school wellness policies, and increasing reimbursement rates to schools participating in federally funded child nutrition programs.

Competitive foods include any foods and beverages sold on school campuses outside the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) school meal programs.⁷ These items often consist of foods and beverages low in nutritional quality such as sugar sweetened beverages, fast food, and snack items available from vending machines.⁸ Competitive foods and beverages are prevalent in the majority of U.S. schools.⁹ Reducing or eliminating access to competitive foods on school campuses means that more nutritional school meals have a better chance of succeeding.

A part of ensuring that school environments become the standard for healthy eating and active living means improving physical activity guidelines in local school wellness policies. An estimated 33 percent of high school students do not achieve the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity and 72 percent of high school students do not attend daily physical education classes.¹⁰ Schools, parents, students, and other community stakeholders all play a role in developing, implementing, and monitoring local wellness policies that help offer students opportunities for adequate physical activity.

Most of the support the federal government provides to schools in the NSLP comes in the form of a cash reimbursement for lunches served to children participating in the program. In the 2005-2006 school year the average full cost to prepare and serve each reimbursable lunch was 23 cents more than the reimbursements.¹¹ Higher reimbursement rates allow schools to make positive nutritional changes to school meals and implement innovative strategies such as farm to school programs that connect local farms to schools.

This tool offers policymakers, educators, grantees, and advocates ideas and strategies to support their efforts to ensure that school environments become the standard for healthy eating and active living. Resources within this toolkit are organized around four categories: general school nutrition, farm to school, competitive foods and beverages, and local school wellness policies and physical activity.

¹ National School Boards Association, "Why Does Childhood Obesity Matter for schools?," <http://www.nsba.org/MainMenu/SchoolHealth/obesity-and-schools/why-does-childhood-obesity.aspx>, (last updated March 8, 2010).

² PolicyLink, The Food Trust & The Reinvestment Fund, (2009). "A Healthy Food Financing Initiative: An Innovative Approach to Improve Health and Spark Economic Development". *A Fact Sheet*. http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/HealthyFoodFinancing_for_2_19.pdf

³ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity, Childhood Nutrition Working Group, (2009). "Child Nutrition Programs: Federal Options and Opportunities," <http://www.nccor.org/downloads/RWJF%20Child%20Nutrition%20Programs%20-%20Fed%20Opportunities.pdf>

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, "National School Lunch Program,"

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/AboutLunch//NSLPFactsheet.pdf> (accessed March 7, 2010).

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Briefing Room, "Child Nutrition Programs: National School Lunch Program," <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/ChildNutrition/lunch.htm>, viewed on March 15, 2010.

⁶ See Note 4 above (USDA).

⁷ Center for Disease Control, "Competitive Foods and Beverages Available for Purchase in Secondary Schools --- Selected Sites, United States, 2006," available at

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5734a2.htm>, August 29, 2008.

⁸ California Project LEAN, "Captive Kids: Selling Obesity at Schools. An Action Guide to Stop the Marketing of Unhealthy Foods and Beverages in School,"

<http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/doc.asp?id=178&parentid=95> (accessed March 7, 2010).

⁹ See Note 7 above (CDC).

¹⁰ National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity, "Model School Wellness Policies,"

<http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org/WellnessPolicies.html> (accessed March 8, 2010).

¹¹ NANA School Meal Reimbursement Fact Sheet.