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How to Make Our Schools Healthy

Healthy Schools Program

INTRODUCTION

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation launched the Healthy Schools Program in February 2006 with an $8 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). RWJF provided an additional $20 million in 2007 to expand the program and a further grant of $23.2 million in September 2011. The goal of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, which was founded in 2005 by the American Heart Association and William J. Clinton Foundation, is to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity by 2015, and to empower kids nationwide to make healthy lifestyle choices.

The Healthy Schools Program provides technical assistance to help schools engage administrators, teachers, parents and vendors in increasing access to physical activity and healthier foods for students and staff. Current grants run to September 2013.

The program addresses two policy priorities of the Childhood Obesity team:

- *Ensure that all foods and beverages served and sold in schools meet or exceed the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.*
- *Increase the time, intensity and duration of physical activity during the school day and during out-of-school programs.*

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WHAT IS THE PROGRAM ABOUT?

"The Healthy Schools Program is about changing the culture of schools," says RWJF senior program officer John Govea.

It's not a classroom curriculum or a prescription for gym activities. Instead, the program is trying to make kids healthier by improving their schools' policies and practices—everything from what's served in the cafeteria to how long recess lasts.

"It's about providing schools with new ideas, knowledge and resources that they can use to make the changes that result in better nutrition and increased activity," says Govea.

WHAT PROBLEM IS THIS PROGRAM ADDRESSING?

Childhood obesity threatens the health of our young people and their future potential. Today, more than 23 million children and adolescents in the United States—nearly one in three young people—are either obese or overweight, putting them at higher risk for serious, even life-threatening health problems.

RWJF places special emphasis on reaching kids who are greater risk for obesity and related health problems, which include Black, Latino, American Indian and Asian/Pacific Island children, as well as children living in lower-income communities.

- The goal of the Healthy Schools Program is to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity by 2015.

HOW DOES THE PROGRAM WORK?

The Healthy Schools Program has staff on the ground in 37 states, working with teachers and administrators to strengthen their schools' approach to health and wellness.

Officially these staffers are called relationship managers, but coach is more apt because that's what they do: they coach schools through a six-step improvement process, starting with formation or activation of a wellness council to lead the effort.

The program also provides a wealth of online resources—tools to help schools assess their environments, make healthy changes and measure results.

The beverage guidelines, for example, qualify drinks by calorie level and nutritional content. No, you won't find sugary sodas on the list.

"What we're seeing—the big picture—is that about 75 percent of schools are making improvements," says Jessica Donze Black, director of the Healthy Schools Program.

- In New Orleans, the Edna Karr High School converted its three beverage vending machines to diet products, as well as plain and flavored waters.
- In New Jersey's West New York community across the Hudson from Manhattan, the schools eliminated fried foods, replaced sodas with juice and restricted milk to reduced fat.

  "We've changed everything about the way our kids eat and exercise," says John Fraraccio, health/physical education supervisor for the school district.

Research shows a link between physical activity and academic achievement. The problem is that kids today are less active than ever. The Healthy Schools Program is working to change that—and not just through traditional recess periods and physical education classes. For example:

- Franklin Central High in Indianapolis got students moving by initiating a video dance game after school three days a week. The game proved so popular that the school system later shared the video equipment with the local middle school.
- Brader Elementary in Newark, Del., instituted "Read and Ride." The school placed stationary bicycles in the library, hallways and gym, and encouraged teachers to send kids to the machines with a book in hand.

A school's influence, of course, doesn't come from bricks and mortar; teachers and administrators do the shaping. Making these role models healthier is also a part of the Healthy Schools Program.

- Memorial High in West New York, N.J., invited both staff and students to join an on-campus yoga and fitness "boot camp." The workout sessions—conducted three afternoons a week—drew more than 40 adults and youngsters.

HOW IS THE PROGRAM PROGRESSING TO DATE?

The number of participating schools has grown significantly.

- **In its 2006-07 pilot year, the Healthy Schools Program provided on-site support to 230 schools in 13 states.**
- **By January 2010—the middle of the program's fourth academic year—that number was up to 3,091 schools in more than 30 states, plus another 455 schools that signed up to participate but were not yet engaged in the program.**

Of 1,313 schools that enrolled prior to September 2009 and completed a follow-up wellness assessment, three-quarters made at least one improvement in one of the eight targeted areas.

Those are just the schools with on-site coaches. But any school anywhere can participate online, with access to the program's interactive tools plus consultation via e-mail and telephone—everything except a live human in the building. Including the virtual audience, the program has reached more than 5 million students in schools across all 50 states.

WHAT ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT RESULTS TO DATE?

"What we're seeing—the big picture—is that about 75 percent of schools are making improvements," says Jessica Donze Black, director of the Healthy Schools Program. "That's the big take-home message."

That figure comes from ongoing evaluation of the program by RMC Research Corp. The evaluators at the firm reported:

- Of 1,313 schools that enrolled prior to September 2009 and completed a follow-up wellness assessment, three-quarters made at least one improvement in one of the eight targeted areas.

The seven areas focus on such aspects as school meals, health education and physical activity. For each area there are numerous criteria of progress, and the more criteria a school meets, the higher it moves up through the program's four achievement levels—bronze, silver, gold and platinum.

- **At the program's June 2010 recognition ceremony, 179 schools earned awards—148 bronze, 30 silver and one gold.** While that is only a fraction of the participating schools, the achievement was still an increase of more than 50 percent over the number of schools recognized in the previous year.
- **The gold recognition award—the first for any school—went to Memorial High School in West New York, N.J.** Gold requires satisfaction of most of the criteria. Platinum takes basically 100 percent compliance.

As those numbers suggest, advancement is no snap. To get an award, a school must meet the requisite criteria for that level across all eight areas—a high bar, says Black.

"In some cases we have schools that if it were just for one content area, they'd be gold. They've made all the improvements they can make in, say, beverages and food, but they haven't progressed at all in physical education."

The real test, of course, is what's happening to the students themselves. Are they getting any healthier?

Working with a subset of participating schools, the evaluation team at RMC is collecting student height and weight data for body mass index (BMI) calculations, plus information on the students' eating and physical activity habits and health knowledge. Early results from the evaluation show that in 21 Healthy Schools students' average body mass index declined between the 2007-2008 and 2009-2010 school years.

"The good news is that evidence is starting to link…fitness and nutrition with good academic outcomes. But there's still a lot of work to be done in terms of changing mind-sets and attitudes," says the program's director Jessica Donze Black

WHAT CHALLENGES IS THE PROGRAM FACING?

The nation's poor economy is a major challenge.

School budgets across the country are the tightest in years; administrators and teachers are stretched thin. In that environment, getting schools to take on anything new—let alone something as big as student health—can be for a hard sell, confesses Black.

"People turn around and say, 'Are you kidding me? I've got 40 kids in my class. What do you want me to do?'"

As one response to the budget crisis, the program is emphasizing improvements that don't cost money—at least not school money.

- Example: Many school kitchens have food fryers and no way to convert to a healthier cooking method. The program coaches try to hook those schools into a pot of federal economic recovery funds set aside specifically for school kitchen assistance, says RWJF's Govea.

Tradition is another big challenge.

Typically, explains Black, schools have been accountable for academic progress. Now they're being asked to also take responsibility for improving their students' physical well-being.

"The good news is that evidence is starting to link those things—fitness and nutrition with good academic outcomes. But there's still a lot of work to be done in terms of changing mind-sets and attitudes," Black says.

"Some principals completely get it. They say, 'I know if my kids are healthier and fit and happy, they're going to be better students.' Other principals say, 'You know, this is not my top priority. I'm sorry, but we have other things going on.'

"It's still very mixed [between those] who think this is really core to the work and [those] who think this is an accessory to the work," concedes Black.

"The vision has always been to eventually put ourselves out of business…to shift the culture so that it is as normal to address these issues [nutrition and physical activity] in schools as it is to address math, reading and science," says Jessica Donze Black. "The goal is to get there by 2015."

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED? ARE WE DOING ANYTHING DIFFERENT AS A RESULT?

- **It is important to engage school districts, which set policy, not just individual schools.**

  "The more that policies and expectations are embedded in district policies, the more sustainability we get," says Black.

  In most instances, she explains, the state sets overall requirements and allows local districts to go from there. The program staff is now working to affect policy at the district level in addition to going school by school.

- **Make Web access to information and tools easy for all who could use it.**

  Initially, access to most of the program's online resources was limited to enrolled schools. But surveys and focus groups indicated that was unnecessarily putting the

information beyond the reach of individual teachers and parents who could benefit from it.

Consequently, the program opened up most of its online materials to anyone willing to provide his or her name and e-mail address—and traffic increased.

"Reducing the barriers to information seems to help with people accessing it," Black says. "If there are too many hurdles, people just won't jump."

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

"The vision has always been to eventually put ourselves out of business … to shift the culture so that it is as normal to address these issues [nutrition and physical activity] in schools as it is to address math reading and science," says Black. "The goal is to get there by 2015."

"Given the current economic environment, it's harder than we wanted it to be," Black says. "But our eyes are still on the prize."

To learn more about the Healthy Schools Program and to gain access to its resources, click here.

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