

# Leadership for Healthy Communities

Advancing Policies to Support  
Healthy Eating and Active Living

Executive Summary

## ACTION STRATEGIES TOOLKIT



A Guide for Local  
and State Leaders  
Working to Create  
Healthy Communities  
and Prevent  
Childhood Obesity

## Message from Leadership for Healthy Communities and Partners

You may have heard the prognosis—if the obesity epidemic in America continues unchecked, this generation of young people may be the first in U.S. history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation. The magnitude of the epidemic means that everyone has a role to play in its reversal, especially because the solution requires policy and environmental changes on many levels.

For example, while parents can be good role models and create healthy environments at home, and the food and beverage industry can take greater responsibility for the nutritional content of the products it offers and promotes, policy-makers are the ones who have the power to make important decisions that affect people's opportunities to eat healthy foods and be physically active within their communities.

Research shows that where we live can impact how well we live. Today, many of our communities are unhealthy. Too frequently, families lack access to full-service grocery stores that stock affordable healthy foods, and children don't have safe places to play or even walk. We want to work together to create environments that pave the way for healthier lifestyles. Healthy communities provide families with convenient access to affordable healthy foods; safe places to walk, ride a bicycle and play; and schools that offer nutritious foods and plenty of opportunities for physical activity. Across the country, policy-makers, community leaders and people in the private sector are collaborating to build such neighborhoods, but we still have a long way to go.

In the United States, more than 23 million children and adolescents are overweight or obese. That means nearly one in three young people are at a higher risk for serious, even life-threatening health problems, such as asthma, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In addition, it is important to emphasize that childhood obesity rates are highest among Latino children and African-American girls.

These trends are likely to create additional pressures on our nation's overburdened health care system. Studies estimate the obesity epidemic costs the country more than \$117 billion per year in direct medical costs and indirect costs related to reduced productivity and absenteeism.

The need for action is clear.

To help meet this need, the Action Strategies Toolkit was developed by *Leadership for Healthy Communities* in close collaboration with the following organizations:

- American Association of School Administrators;
- Council of State Governments;
- International City/County Management Association;
- Local Government Commission;
- National Association of Counties;
- National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund;
- National Association of State Boards of Education;
- National Conference of State Legislatures;
- National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, & Families;
- National School Boards Association; and
- United States Conference of Mayors.

Leadership for Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was created to support local and state leaders nationwide in their efforts to promote

healthy, active communities and access to affordable healthy foods. The strategies in this toolkit include promising and evidence-based practices that advance these goals and build upon the work in which policy-makers are already engaged.

Through daily decisions about budgets, laws, regulations or zoning, policy-makers can help develop healthier and more viable communities. For example, government leaders can facilitate land-use policies, such as mixed-use development, and support public parks and transit options, including walking paths and bicycle lanes. They can create incentives to attract supermarkets and farmers' markets to underserved communities and improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages in schools.

Putting the strategies in this toolkit into action will take strong, coordinated leadership by policy leaders nationwide. Through collaboration among states, counties, cities and schools, policy-makers can meet their constituents' demand for healthy living as they take steps to reduce health care costs and improve health care performance in their communities. As the leaders of policy-maker organizations at every level of government, we believe that the strategies presented in this toolkit have tremendous potential to change the trajectory of our children's future.

When policy leaders unite for a common purpose, it enables communities to tap into a larger network of social and financial resources. Together, we can support healthy schools, healthy communities and healthy children.



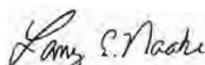
**David Adkins**  
Executive Director  
Council of State Governments



**Daniel A. Domenech**  
Executive Director  
American Association of School Administrators



**Donald J. Borut**  
Executive Director  
National League of Cities



**Larry E. Naake**  
Executive Director  
National Association of Counties



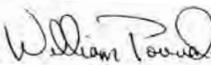
**Anne L. Bryant**  
Executive Director  
National School Boards Association



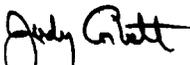
**Robert J. O'Neill, Jr.**  
Executive Director  
International City/County Management Association



**Tom Cochran**  
Executive Director  
United States Conference of Mayors



**William Pound**  
Executive Director  
National Conference of State Legislatures



**Judy Corbett**  
Executive Director  
Local Government Commission



**Arturo Vargas**  
Executive Director  
National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund



**Maya Rockey Moore Cummings**  
Director  
Leadership for Healthy Communities



**Brenda L. Welburn**  
Executive Director  
National Association of State Boards of Education

# Executive Summary

*Leadership for Healthy Communities'* comprehensive Action Strategies Toolkit contains policy approaches and resources that can help state and local policy-makers improve our children's health and prevent childhood obesity. This executive summary is an at-a-glance version of the full toolkit, which is available online at [www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org](http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org). The policy approaches and resources within the toolkit represent a collection of current best approaches that childhood obesity policy experts, policy-makers and representatives from policy-maker organizations have identified and reviewed.

Each section recommends targeted strategies based on the environmental setting, identifies key stakeholders, outlines policy and program options, provides concrete directions on how to start programs, describes resources that can help inform the process, and includes examples of how other states and localities have achieved progress.

This executive summary provides an outline of strategies covered in the toolkit and offers a few examples of policy options for each strategy.



Photo: Getty Images/Image Source

"The dramatic rise in childhood obesity has implications for health care spending and quality of life. As states fund programs from nutrition to long-term care, they must responsibly act to affect the lifestyle choices of individuals to curtail the costs of providing those services."

**New Jersey Assemblyman Herb Conaway, chair of New Jersey's and the National Conference of State Legislatures' health committees**

## Active Transportation

**What the research shows:** There is a significant body of evidence linking transportation, planning and community design to increased physical activity.<sup>1</sup>

Policy options include:

### *Improving safety for bicyclists and pedestrians*

- Develop or re-evaluate long-term transportation plans that explicitly set "active transportation" goals for walking or biking as modes of transportation.
- Implement "complete streets" in neighborhoods to improve safe walking and biking options in communities. Complete street measures include—but are not limited to—bicycle lanes, pedestrian signals and tactics that promote moderate traffic speeds.
- Support walking school bus and Safe Routes to School programs.

### *Expanding trails and connections*

- Ensure sidewalk continuity and direct routes for pedestrians and bicyclists, including connections between dead-end streets and culs-de-sac. Ideally, trails and sidewalks should connect to a variety of town resources, such as schools, grocery stores and libraries.



## Land Use for Active Living

**What the research shows:** Evidence suggests that youth get more regular physical activity when they have opportunities to walk or ride a bicycle from home to nearby schools, parks and businesses.<sup>2,3</sup>

Policy options include:

### *Re-evaluating urban design and comprehensive land-use plans to improve active living*

- Work with planners to develop dense, mixed-use neighborhoods with schools, businesses, recreation facilities, parks, libraries and other facilities within walking distance of residential areas or near public transportation and major roads.
- Adopt ordinances or implement programs that promote the development of compact, pedestrian-friendly housing, offices and retail shops in close proximity to transit stations or stops.

### *Improving community design features to encourage physical activity*

- Develop design guidelines aimed at improving streetscapes. For example, guidelines may include providing wider sidewalks, trees that shade parks and paths, benches for people to rest, off-street parking and walkways from parking to sidewalks.
- Make entrances to civic buildings, such as schools, directly accessible for pedestrians.
- Adopt building codes that make stairs more attractive and accessible for people to use and that call for signs touting the health benefits of using stairs.

## Open Spaces, Parks and Recreation

**What the research shows:** An increasing body of evidence suggests that children who live in communities with open spaces, such as parks, ball fields, nature centers, picnic areas and campgrounds, are more physically active than those living in areas with fewer recreation facilities.<sup>4</sup>

Policy options include:

### *Increasing access to recreation facilities and open spaces, including parks and community gardens*

- Approve the construction of new recreation facilities along trails or public transit routes to make them more accessible to residents.
- Maintain and create open spaces, neighborhood parks and pocket parks in close proximity to residents' homes.
- Develop joint-use agreements that allow community members to use school-owned recreation facilities.

"Absolutely, childhood obesity reduction should be a priority issue. It is becoming a real health epidemic and it's something that leaders have to address. This is not just an obesity issue but a future-of-our-children issue."

**Miami Mayor Manuel "Manny" Diaz,  
President, United States  
Conference of Mayors**

## Quality Physical Activity In and Near Schools

**What the research shows:** Evidence suggests that students who spend more time in physical education or other school-based physical activity can improve their fitness levels and their scores on standardized academic achievement tests.<sup>5,6</sup>

Policy options include:

### *Offering quality physical activity daily*

- Make 30 minutes of quality daily physical activity a requirement for all students in all grade levels.
- Create a comprehensive school physical activity program that integrates physical activity into educational settings to encourage sustainable, healthy behaviors.
- Ensure that there is funding available for the construction and maintenance of gymnasiums, playgrounds and fields.

### *Requiring standards-based physical education (PE) classes taught by certified PE teachers*

- Include high-quality physical education as a core requirement in school curricula and set time standards (for example, at least 150 minutes per week).
- Increase funding to school districts to provide high-quality PE classes and teachers.
- Adopt high-quality PE certification standards so teachers are adequately prepared.

### *Supporting walk-to-school and Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs*

- Adopt a comprehensive SRTS program.
- Support walking school buses—groups of children walking to school together with supervision by more than one adult.

### *Facilitating joint-use agreements*

- Establish agreements to make school and community facilities accessible for physical activity. For example, school officials can work with local policy-makers to allow community residents to use school facilities during after-school hours. Agreements also can enable students and school faculty to use community facilities.

“How can we expect to succeed in confronting childhood obesity if we eliminate recess, serve unhealthy lunches in our schools, ignore the need to work with other groups and reduce physical education classes? We need to come together, focus on the problem and put our kids first.”

**Randy Collins,**  
President, American  
Association of School  
Administrators



Photo: Charlie Schuck

## Safety and Crime Prevention

**What the research shows:** In underserved communities, access to safe places to play, such as school playgrounds during after-school hours, improves the likelihood that children will be physically active.<sup>7 8</sup>

Policy options include:

*Keeping communities safe and free from crime to encourage outdoor activity*

- Increase policing in high-crime areas, pedestrian walkways and parks.
- Adopt problem-oriented policing, an approach that includes forming partnerships with organizations and communities to reduce crime.
- Adopt community design strategies that discourage crime.

## Quality Nutrition in Schools

**What the research shows:** Changes in school food policies can improve nutrition, reduce consumption of empty calories and potentially reduce excess weight gain over time.<sup>9</sup>

Policy options include:

*Ensuring that students have appealing, healthy choices in foods and beverages offered in schools*

- Improve the quality of school meals.
- Enforce strong local wellness policies and limit the availability of low-nutrient, energy-dense foods on school grounds.
- Include nutrition education in school curricula.

*Supporting farm-to-school and school garden programs*

- Develop policies and programs that support farm-to-school programs and target schools that serve a large number of children who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals.
- Create edible school gardens that integrate gardening and fresh seasonal cooking into curricula, culture and food programs.

*Implementing a standards-based health education program taught by teachers certified in health education*

- Include nutrition education as a component of a comprehensive health core requirement in the school curriculum and adopt high-quality, statewide standards.
- Adopt high-quality certification standards that require teachers be adequately trained to teach health education classes.
- Encourage the integration of health education into other subjects.

“Healthy students make better learners. Overweight children not only tend to become obese adults, but these adults are taxing our health care system...Schools did not create the childhood obesity crisis. But schools can either contribute to it or help to end it.”

**Anne Bryant,  
Executive Director,  
National School  
Boards Association**



Photo: Tyrone Turner

## Supermarkets and Healthy Food Vendors

**What the research shows:** Greater availability of healthy food in stores is related to greater availability and increased consumption of healthy foods at home.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

Policy options include:

### *Attracting grocery stores that provide high-quality, healthy and affordable foods to lower-income neighborhoods*

- Establish a food policy council or task force that advances healthy food options, including supermarkets.
- Add specific language to comprehensive local development plans to identify grocery stores as important considerations for developing and redeveloping neighborhoods.
- Provide grants, loan programs, small business development programs and tax incentives that encourage grocery stores to locate in underserved areas.

### *Encouraging convenience stores and bodegas to offer healthier food*

- Offer financial, promotional and other incentives to encourage convenience store owners to offer healthier food options.
- Encourage or require store owners to accept electronic benefit transfer cards for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, formerly known as food stamps, as a form of payment.
- Encourage store owners to limit the marketing of unhealthy food in corner stores located near schools.

### *Establishing healthy mobile markets*

- Pass a resolution for a food policy council or task force that advances healthy food options and includes mobile markets.
- Provide incentives to locate mobile markets (e.g., green carts and trucks) that offer convenient and affordable healthy food in lower-income communities that lack access or have limited access to healthy foods.

## Farm-Fresh Local Foods

**What the research shows:** Policies that increase local sources of food will provide consumers with healthier choices, farmers with more marketing opportunities and communities with powerful economic development opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

Policy options include:

### *Supporting farmers' markets*

- Provide incentives, grants and subsidies to farmers' market organizers to support new and existing farmers' markets.
- Encourage farmers' markets to accept Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and SNAP benefits.

### *Supporting community gardens*

- Convert neglected areas into green spaces that can be used for community gardens or provide community garden grants and staff support.

### *Supporting the procurement of locally grown food*

- Support small farms and farm-to-institution relationships by encouraging school and government procurement policies that favor local, healthy foods.
- Support farm-to-cafeteria opportunities, farmers' markets and other regional food initiatives.
- Provide financial assistance to regional produce farmers for processing and distribution.



"Municipal officials increasingly recognize the impact of childhood obesity on healthy youth development, quality of life and health care costs for communities and local governments. The Leadership for Healthy Communities Partnership has enabled us to share our dedication to preventing childhood obesity and promoting community wellness."

**Donald J. Borut,**  
Executive Director,  
National League  
of Cities



## Restaurants

**What the research shows:** Studies have indicated that nutrition information on restaurant menus empowers consumers and influences food choices.<sup>14</sup>

Policy options include:

*Encouraging restaurants to offer reasonably sized portions and low-fat and low-calorie menus*

- Create programs and policies to help restaurants promote healthier foods and beverages and reasonably-sized portions.

*Encouraging restaurant menu labeling*

- Adopt policies to require fast-food and chain restaurants to provide calorie and nutrition information on their menus or menu boards.

## Food and Beverage Marketing

**What the research shows:** According to the Institute of Medicine, “food and beverage marketing practices geared to children and youth are out of balance with healthful diets and contribute to an environment that puts their health at risk.”<sup>15</sup>

Policy options include:

*Regulating the marketing of unhealthy foods in or near schools and other youth facilities*

- Decline offers from food and beverage marketers to donate equipment or sponsor before- and after-school programs (e.g., a new scoreboard with a beverage company logo on it or new uniforms for sports teams with food and beverage logos).
- Implement ordinances that restrict advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages in or near schools, youth centers and other areas where youth gather.

“We are all aware that the rapid rise in obesity rates—particularly among youth—foreshadows serious health problems. For local leaders, the trend also presents quality-of-life and fiscal challenges. That is why a growing number of city and county officials and school administrators see the urgency to collaborate to address this epidemic by making it easier for all residents to live more active lives and eat healthy food.”

**Robert J. O’Neill, Jr.,  
Executive Director,  
International City/  
County Management  
Association**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Designing for Active Living Among Adults, Research Summary. San Diego: Active Living Research, Spring 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> Giles-Corti B and Donovan RJ. "The Relative Influence of Individual, Social, and Physical Environment Determinants of Physical Activity." *Social Science and Medicine*, 54(12):1793-1812, June 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Lopez-Zetina J, Lee H and Friis R. "The Link Between Obesity and the Built Environment. Evidence from an Ecological Analysis of Obesity and Vehicle Miles of Travel in California." *Health & Place*, 12(4): 656-664, December 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Davison K and Lawson C. "Do Attributes in the Physical Environment Influence Children's Physical Activity? A Review of the Literature." *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 3(19), March 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Designing for Active Living Among Children, Research Summary. San Diego: Active Living Research, Fall 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> Physical Education Physical Activity and Academic Performance, Research Brief. San Diego: Active Living Research, Fall 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Farley T, Meriwether R, Baker E, et al. "Safe play spaces to promote physical activity in inner-city children: results from a pilot study of an environmental intervention." *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(9): 1625-1631, September 2007.
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- <sup>9</sup> Cullen K and Thompson D. "Texas school food policy changes related to middle school à la carte/snack bar foods: potential savings in kilocalories." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 105(12):1952-1954, December 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> Bodor J, Rose D, Farley T, et al. "Neighborhood fruit and vegetable availability and consumption: the role of small food stores in an urban environment." *Public Health Nutrition*, 11(4): 413-420, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Cheadle A, Psaty B, Curry S, et al. "Community-level comparisons between the grocery store environment and individual dietary practices." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 20(2): 250-261, 1991.
- <sup>12</sup> Fisher B and Stogatz D. "Community measures of low-fat milk consumption: comparing store shelves with households." *American Journal of Public Health*, 89(2): 235-237, February 1999.
- <sup>13</sup> Food without Thought: How U.S. Farm Policy Contributes to Obesity, Minneapolis, MN: Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, November 2006. Available at [www.iatp.org/iatp/factsheets.cfm?accountID=258&refID=89968](http://www.iatp.org/iatp/factsheets.cfm?accountID=258&refID=89968).
- <sup>14</sup> Burton S. and Creyer E. "What consumers don't know can hurt them: Consumer evaluations and disease risk perceptions of restaurant menu items." *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*. 38(1):121-145, Summer 2004.
- <sup>15</sup> McGinnis J, Gootman J, Kraak I and the Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth. Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity. Washington: The National Academies, 2006. Available at: <http://iom.edu/CMS/3788/21939/31330.aspx>.

### Cover Photos:

Girls in grocery store shopping cart: Tyrone Turner

Boy and girl on bikes with water bottles: Getty Images/Image Source

Rear view portrait of girl walking in neighborhood: Getty Images/David Buffington

Group of active children on playing field: Roger Tully

Teens in cafeteria lunchroom: Tyrone Turner

