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## Diet, exercise and health in schools

As the U.S. population grows heavier and new science comes to light about the importance of proper exercise and diet required to maintain a healthy lifestyle, school districts are coming under increasing pressure to do more to promote health among the student body.

The Washington State Legislature is requiring schools to modify their policies on the food served outside of federal breakfast and lunch programs, as well as strengthen their nutrition and physical education curricula. WSSDA is currently drafting a model policy that will help districts meet the new state requirement that they have a comprehensive policy in place by August 2005.

As districts seek to fulfill this new legal requirement, important decisions loom. What foods should be available to students outside of mealtimes? What standards should the district use to determine the nutritional value of foods? What is appropriate portion size? How can districts mitigate the loss of revenue from vending machines that support other valuable school programs?

This edition of *Hot Topics* will summarize the trends on child health, review federal and state law governing school nutrition, and provide information on additional resources that can help schools make more healthy choices available to students.

# Nutrition and health

## *Districts asked to do more to promote healthy lifestyles*

While proper diet and exercise have long been top public health concerns, school districts are now confronting this issue like never before. Health curriculum and school food services have garnered attention for years, but state and federal policy-makers are continuing to increase their interest and oversight of these district responsibilities amid a flurry of new reports on the risks and consequences of poor diet and exercise for America's youth.

The findings by leading government researchers on child and adult obesity and risk of obesity are sobering. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of overweight children has tripled to an estimated 15 percent—or about 8 million children—over the past three decades. A similar number of children are “at risk” of becoming overweight. While boys are more likely to be overweight than girls, and Hispanic and African-American students are more likely to be overweight than white students, all demographic groups have seen increases in obesity to more than 10 percent of each group. Overweight children are more likely to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high insulin levels.

## **Childhood patterns can become lifelong problems**

The health problems only intensify after these children leave school. Data show that children who have weight problems are more likely to have the same difficulties as adults, and the impact of poor diet and exercise among adults continues to grow more serious. Overweight adults have increased incidence of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, conditions that are deadly. In fact, the CDC now categorizes diseases related to diet and exercise as a leading direct cause of death, second only to smoking. Every year, poor diet and exercise leads to 400,000 deaths, and again, children who establish poor habits and are overweight are more likely to suffer the same condition as adults.

The cause of this public health crisis is no mystery. Children simply are not getting enough exercise, while eating too many calories and the wrong kinds of foods.

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The CDC recommends that children exercise at least 30 minutes every day, yet less than one quarter of the nation's children are active for even 20 minutes daily. In a recent survey, while about 75 percent of middle school kids reported getting regular vigorous physical activity, only half of high school students get the same kind of exercise. One in seven children reports getting no recent physical activity at all.

The data on childhood nutrition are equally discouraging. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports that only two percent of youth

meet all the recommendations of the USDA Food Guide Pyramid, the tool that reminds children to eat fruits and vegetables, grains, meats and dairy, while limiting fats. Shockingly, 16 percent of children do not meet any of the serving recommendations. Only one in five students eat the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables per day and teenagers drink twice as much carbonated soda as milk.

### Nutrition in schools

More than 26 million students are served through USDA's National School Lunch and Breakfast pro-

grams, and every one of them has access to healthy nutrition during the school day. In order to qualify for USDA subsidies, districts must design breakfasts and lunches that meet strict guidelines for either food-based standards or nutrient standards in their menu planning. Food-based menu planning outlines specific quantities of each food group that must be served at each meal: meat or meat alternative, fruits and vegetables, grains and breads and milk. Nutrient-based planning must adhere to Recommended Dietary Intake guidelines for calories, fat, protein, vitamins and minerals.

## State PTA announces winners of School Board Challenge for healthy schools

In an effort to highlight outstanding school health and nutrition programs, the Washington State Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the Washington State Public Health Association issued the Washington School Board Challenge. The challenge provides a vehicle to express appreciation to school board members, dedicated educators, school administrators, and community leaders who strive to provide physical and nutrition education, healthier meals, and physical activity opportunities for all students.

Each of the winners has either established exemplary nutrition and health programs or are about to implement innovative programs. The five winners of the challenge are:

- Bellevue School District
- Mill A School District (Skamania County)
- Olympia School District
- Snohomish School District
- Assumption Catholic School (Bellingham)

The winners were selected for a variety of innovative approaches to promoting student health. Full details of each school's award winning program is available on the PTA Web site at

[www.wastatepta.org](http://www.wastatepta.org).

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The School Board Challenge sought out nutrition and physical activity policies that are making a demonstrated difference in students' access

to healthy foods, nutrition education and quality physical activity. By identifying these exemplary policies, the PTA hopes to share information about effective strategies with school districts throughout the state.

"Proper nutrition is so important in today's world. Let's at least have healthy food choices in the schools," said Jean Carpenter, Executive Director of the Washington PTA. "We're interested in education, but we're also interested in the whole child. Children can't learn if they're not physically healthy."

Award recipients earned a certificate of recognition and a cash prize of up to \$2000 from Stonyfield Farm, the nation's largest producer of organic yogurt.

Having good meals at school is more than just good for building healthy children; it has a real impact on student achievement. For example, USDA has shown that students that participate in the School Breakfast Program improve their test scores and reduce their rates of absence and tardiness. On the other hand, children from families that report experiences of hunger are more likely to show behavioral problems, such as hyperactivity and aggression, and emotional problems, like anxiety—factors that reduce student academic performance.

While nutrition for school meals is highly regulated, USDA guidelines for "competitive" foods offered in the cafeteria outside the school lunch program are much more lax. These foods may not be of "minimal nutritional value," such as soda, gum and hard candy, but they must only offer a minimum of five percent of the Recommended Dietary Intake of one of several nutrients. Under these guidelines, potato chips, chocolate bars and sports drinks are still allowed in the cafeteria during mealtimes. Federal regulations do not govern the sale of foods, even those of minimal nutritional value such as soda and candy,

elsewhere on the school grounds or outside mealtimes.

Some states have developed their own standards for what kinds of competitive foods are available to students. California and West Virginia now require all foods to meet nutrition standards, while other states restrict access to foods low nutritional value during all or part of the school day.

School districts also have begun to make local decisions to move away from low-value foods. “Nutrition is central to our children’s physical and academic development,” says Superintendent Ronald Epps of Columbia, South Carolina. “Therefore, it is essential to academic achievement.” His district has banned all chewing gum and candy bars, foods with 40 percent sugar by weight or more than 8 grams of fat, and has replaced carbonated beverages with 100 percent fruit juices.

The sale of competitive foods, often offered at snack bars, in vending machines or by student salespeople, are a considerable source of revenue that supports valuable school programs, such as sports, music or student government. Nearly every high school in the country has vending machines or a school store, as do three-quarters of the middle schools and nearly half of elementary schools. Many schools are wary of altering the kinds of foods available through vending machines or fund drives, for fear that sales would suffer.

The school district in Calais, Maine decided that raising money for valuable programs and promoting good nutrition should not be mutually exclusive. The district adopted a vending policy that allows only fruit juice, bottled water, low-fat milk, and healthy snack foods. The high school student council, which relies on vend-

ing revenues for their activities, reports that they have seen an increase in sales. “Students deserve the right to healthier options,” says Heather Erickson, the school health coordinator.

A joint project of CDC and USDA called *Making it Happen!* is collecting success stories from districts that have overhauled their competitive food operations. This project shows these efforts can be successful in selling healthy foods and maintaining revenue by using the four P’s:

- Ask students to suggest healthful products to offer;
- Promote products to create awareness and motivation to try them;
- Place products so they are easy to choose; and
- Price products to give healthful items a competitive advantage.

According the project, students will buy and eat healthful foods, and schools can maintain revenues from healthful options.

### Health and fitness curriculum

While having access to the right foods in school is important, health and fitness education have an impact on the choices students make outside the cafeteria. Unlike standards for school lunches, states have much more flexibility to define what students need to know and what kind of physical education is offered in school.

Recognizing that schools teach students essential skills that lead to a healthy lifestyle, Washington has adopted Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) for health and fitness education. Under these EALRs, students must learn to:

- Develop movement skills;
- Participate in physical activities;

- Understand the concepts of health-related physical fitness, and develop and monitor progress on personal fitness goals;
- Understand the relationship of nutrition and food nutrients to physical performance and body composition;
- Recognize patterns of growth and development;
- Understand the concept of control and prevention of disease;
- Acquire skills to live safely and reduce health risks;
- Understand how environmental factors affect health;
- Gather and analyze health information;
- Use social skills to promote health and safety;
- Understand how emotions influence decision making;
- Analyze health and safety information; and
- Develop a health and fitness plan and a monitoring system.

State lawmakers recently clarified that the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) will not be used to measure student achievement on these health and fitness EALRs. Instead, the Legislature said districts must have classroom-based assessments or “other strategies” in place in for health and fitness (as well as social studies and the arts) by the end of the 2008-09 school year. The new law directs the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to report on assessment options—including recommendations for a timeline and model assessments—by September 1 of this year. Voluntary assessments are to be available in the 2005-06 school year.

In Washington, school districts must also comply with physical education (PE) curriculum requirements set forth by the State Board of Education. Students in first through eighth grades must receive the average of 100 minutes of PE instruction per week by a certified classroom or physical education teacher. Recess as normally provided cannot be used to meet the requirement, although some schools do use recess time to provide teacher-directed activities one or two days a week. While high school students are not required to take PE, high schools must make PE available for those that choose to take it.

Washington's PE requirements are not unusual. According to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, Illinois remains the only state where students through 12<sup>th</sup> grade must go to gym every day. Only Louisiana and Texas have boosted physical education programs in recent years, but only elevating their requirements to 30 minutes daily for elementary school students.

As children grow older, in addition to few PE opportunities in school, the amount of exercise they get outside of school also decreases, often dramatically. As children move from elementary school, when most play organized team sports, to middle and high school, fewer than half play on school or club teams. For children to get the exercise they need, they must be increasingly self-motivated.

Despite ongoing discussion of the importance of PE, many states and districts are experiencing pressure, reinforced by the consequences built into standardized testing, to spend more of the school day on core academic subjects rather than physical fitness. The CDC notes, however, that besides the other long-term health benefits of regular physical activity, exercise also

helps reduce feelings of depression and anxiety and promotes psychological well-being, factors that can help children do better in school.

While school districts are continually being asked by legislators to do more to promote student health and fitness, many of the determinates of overall child health are factors that occur at home. Does the family go biking, walking, play sports or exercise together in some other way? What foods are available at home after school, during the evening meal, or on weekends? While schools have a responsibility to provide nutritious foods and educate children to make the right choices, the example that is set at home is key to a child's health.

#### Additional resources

CDC has developed an Adolescent and School Health Web site that can be found in the CDC A to Z index, [www.cdc.gov/az.do](http://www.cdc.gov/az.do), under "School Health." Among other valuable resources, CDC has developed a *School Health Index*, a self-assessment and

planning tool that helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of a school's health promotion policies and programs, develop an action plan for improving student health, and involve teachers, parents, students, and the community in improving school policies and programs.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service has developed an online resource center called Team Nutrition, which provides schools with nutrition education materials for children and families; technical assistance materials for school food service directors, managers, and staff; and materials to build school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity. Team Nutrition can be found at [www.fns.usda.gov/tn](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn).

The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) has developed a free publication, *Fit, Healthy and Ready to Learn*, that provides direction on establishing an overall policy framework and specific policies for school health programs.

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### Community forums explore local solutions

A large coalition of education and health organizations have joined forces to organize a series of community meetings to hash out local solutions to the crisis in child health and nutrition. These meetings will provide an opportunity to discuss the far-reaching consequences of children's inactivity and poor nutrition, and share ways schools can help address this serious problem.

The forums are sponsored by WSSDA, the Washington State Board of Health, the Washington State Department of Health, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the University of Washington Center for Public Health Nutrition, the Washington State Parent Teacher Association, the Washington School Food Services Association and

local health jurisdictions in Benton-Franklin, Clark, Island, King, Pierce, and Thurston counties.

The organizations believe that schools, as a center point in children's lives, are uniquely positioned to enhance student learning by promoting and supporting healthy behaviors. By working together, they hope to make it easier for children to choose health-promoting foods, be physically active, and be ready to learn at school.

School board members and all other concerned community members are invited to participate. Further information on the forums is available on the Washington State Board of Health's Web site, [www.doh.wa.gov/SBOH](http://www.doh.wa.gov/SBOH).

## *WSSDA crafting policy on nutrition, exercise*

During the 2004 session, the Washington State Legislature passed a law which requires WSSDA to draft a new model policy that school boards can use to guide their districts' efforts to promote good student nutrition and exercise. In turn, local districts are required to adopt such a policy or review and modify an existing policy.

"At a time when obesity is killing more Americans than ever before, this bill sends a clear message that we in Washington want to teach our children about healthy eating and living before it's too late," said Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles of Seattle, the primary sponsor of Senate Bill 5436.

This new health and nutrition policy will focus on student access to nutritious foods and physical exercise. This policy will address the nutritional content of food provided to or sold to students during the school day, with the exception of those foods served through the current federal breakfast and lunch programs. The policy will also include guidelines for the health, nutrition, physical education and fitness curriculum.

"Given the seriousness of the consequences of childhood obesity, WSSDA certainly supported this bill during the legislative process," said Dan Steele, Director of Governmental Relations. "But we know that schools can't solve the problem of childhood obesity simply by implementing excellent nutrition in the cafeteria, snack bar and vending machines. By including good guidelines for health and nutrition curricula in this model policy, we aim to help students and their families make better choices at home."

The Legislature required WSSDA to work with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, the De-

partment of Health and the Washington Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance on the new model policy.

In an effort to explore best practices for student health and nutrition, as well as engage other organizations that have a stake in the issue, WSSDA is convening a larger advisory committee that will provide further input. Diverse interests will be represented: nutrition and health advocates, health care providers, business associations, food-service providers, educators and others.

"Our working group aims to craft a stand-alone policy that can be implemented by school boards all across

the state," said Marilee Scarbrough, WSSDA's Director of Policy and Legal Services. "The ultimate decisions, however, lie with the local school boards that know what will work best in their communities. We fully expect that local boards will establish their own policy-making process, conduct their own hearings and set local policies and goals."

WSSDA is required to draft the model policy by the end of the 2004. Local school boards will have until August 2005 to complete their own local process and adopt a policy or modify an existing policy.

### **Findings by the Legislature included in Senate Bill 5436**

- 1) The Legislature finds that:
  - a) Childhood obesity has reached epidemic levels in Washington and throughout the nation. Nearly one in five Washington adolescents in grades nine through twelve were recently found to be overweight or at risk of being overweight;
  - b) Overweight and obese children are at higher risk for developing severe long-term health problems, including but not limited to Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and certain cancers;
  - c) Overweight youth also are often affected by discrimination, psychological stress, and low self-esteem;
  - d) Obesity and subsequent diseases are largely preventable through diet and regular physical activity;
  - e) A child who has eaten a well-balanced meal and is healthy is more likely to be prepared to learn in the classroom;
  - f) Encouraging adolescents to adopt healthy lifelong eating habits can increase their productivity and reduce their risk of dying prematurely;
  - g) Frequent eating of carbohydrate-rich foods or drinking sweet liquids throughout the day increases a child's risk for dental decay, the most common chronic childhood disease;
  - h) Schools are a logical place to address the issue of obesity in children and adolescents; and
  - i) Increased emphasis on physical activity at all grade levels is essential to enhancing the well-being of Washington's youth.
- 2) While the United States Department of Agriculture regulates the nutritional content of meals sold in schools under its school breakfast and lunch program, limited standards are in place to regulate "competitive foods," which may be high in added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat content. However, the United States Department of Agriculture does call for states and local entities to add restrictions on competitive foods, as necessary.

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See NASBE's Healthy Schools Web site at [www.nasbe.org/HealthySchools](http://www.nasbe.org/HealthySchools) for more information.

Action for Healthy Kids, [www.actionforhealthykids.org](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org), is a nationwide initiative of more than 40 national organizations and governmental agencies chaired by former Surgeon General David Satcher. The organization is fighting the nation's epidemic of overweight, sedentary, and undernourished children and adolescents, and includes a Washington state team which brings these national resources to bear on local issues.

Here in Washington, several education and health organizations have teamed up to develop a local clearinghouse of information on school health. Found on the Internet at [www.healthyschoolswa.org](http://www.healthyschoolswa.org), the project is a collaborative effort of the Washington State Board of Health, the Center for Public Health Nutrition at the University of Washington, the Washington State Department of Health, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Children's Alliance and WSSDA.

## Hot Topics

*Hot Topics* is WSSDA's publication created to address issues affecting school boards in Washington state.

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