

intro

The number of overweight or obese adolescents is reaching epidemic proportions. According to the U.S. Surgeon General's report, *Overweight and Obesity Fact Sheet: Overweight in Children and Adolescents*, in 1999, 14 percent of U.S. adolescents aged 12 to 19 years were overweight—three times more than just 20 years ago. This alarming statistic is causing educators to sit up and take notice of the foods they offer their students in the cafeteria, of the opportunities they provide for physical activity, and of the lessons they teach about health and nutrition in their classrooms.

Why the concern about health and nutrition in this climate of high stakes testing and accountability? Healthy lifestyles and academic success are tightly interwoven. As *Turning Points 2000* suggests, "improvement in one leads to improvement in the other, both directly and indirectly. Middle grades schools should support physical and mental health and fitness by providing a safe, caring, and healthy environment, health education, and access to health services."

A climate that promotes healthy living should be interwoven into the very fabric of the school. Throughout the following pages, you will learn what actions experts at last fall's Healthy Schools Summit: Taking Action for Children's Nutrition and Fitness proposed to support healthy school environments, what is working in middle schools around the country, and what still needs to be done to ensure all our young adolescents come to school ready and able to learn—physically and mentally.

You'll also learn about a unique learning experience that combines physical activity with an opportunity for students to develop and enhance their skills in leadership, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and academics. The adventure curriculum, which is finding a place in many schools around the country, is about more than ropes and whistles, it's also about building a healthy self concept. ■

Helping Kids Make Good Choices

By Rick Herrig and Robert Murray, MD

Middle school students face a whirlwind of decisions every day. Some are as trivial as the color of pen to use when taking notes while others are more serious, such as whether to accept cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs from a friend.

Somewhere in this maze of choices and consequences are the decisions adolescents make about nutrition and fitness—decisions that not only affect their immediate health, but also their future well-being.

The number of overweight or obese adolescents is reaching epidemic proportions. According to the U. S. Surgeon General's report, *Overweight and Obesity Fact Sheet: Overweight in Children and Adolescents* (www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_adolescents.htm), in 1999, 14 percent of U.S. adolescents aged 12 to 19 years were overweight—that's a three-fold increase in just 20 years.

Although middle school students may see excessive weight as an appearance issue, it is more than that: It is a health issue with staggering consequences, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and bone disease. Research indicates that overweight adolescents have a 70 percent to 80 percent chance of becoming obese adults, and 300,000 adults die each year due to complications from obesity.

Health problems related to excessive weight gain and adolescent obesity often present themselves well before adulthood. The incidences of high cholesterol, vascular plaques, high blood pressure, diabetes, and bone disease are increasing among adolescents. In fact, "adult-onset" Type II Diabetes now is simply called Type II Diabetes because of the frequency of diagnosis among adolescents.

Given these startling statistics, it's no surprise that some schools are going beyond simple health education classes to implement more comprehensive efforts to help students make healthy decisions.

Young adolescents spend much of their day at school, where they are bombarded by food and activity choices (or lack thereof). We know our schools don't always provide healthy food options, and budget shortages have forced many schools across the country to cut PE classes and sports offerings. Many schools depend on income from soda and food-vending sales to counter declining budgets, which only adds to poor choice alternatives for students.

That said, if we do not find ways to give our students appealing healthy food options, adequate time for physical activity at school, and sports and activity offerings after school, then we have failed to meet the health and fitness needs of the students we serve.

Making Health a Priority

Why the focus on good nutrition and fitness during a climate of increased attention on student achievement and high stakes testing? Adolescents need healthy bodies to have healthy minds. *The Action for Healthy Kids Fact Sheet on Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Achievement* (www.actionforhealthykids.org/tools/facts.htm) supports the contention that good nutrition and physical activity can improve student achievement.

Schools across the nation are implementing a variety of programs to reverse the growing trend of overweight adolescents. It has been our experience that when students have the opportunity to make good choices, they will. We present the following vision of a healthy school for you to consider. Keep in mind that changing the structure of the school environment—from preserving physical education with an appropriate student ratio of no more than 25:1 to providing visually appealing healthy food choices (such as trail mix instead of gummy bears) on the cafeteria à la carte menu—is key to sustaining healthy school environments.

The “day-in-the-life” sketch of a healthy school student named Max will give you some great ideas about how to integrate good nutrition and fitness practices into your school (see Figure 1).

This “Day in the Life of Max” illustrates that:

- 1) Schools can integrate nutrition and physical activity into the regular curriculum.
- 2) Schools can offer creative ways to get kids to eat a good breakfast.
- 3) Schools can revisit the Food Guide Pyramid to learn correct portion sizes.
- 4) Schools can provide physical education with an appropriate student/teacher ratio.
- 5) Schools can strike a balance between the budgetary necessity of vending machines and working with vendors to stock more healthy choices.
- 6) Schools can purchase dairy vending machines. Bettendorf (Iowa) Middle School can’t keep its own stocked fast enough, because the demand is so high—a great problem to have.
- 7) Schools can encourage students to include good nutrition and fitness at home as well.

A Day in the Life of Max

Homeroom

As Max heads to homeroom, he sees a friend in the hallway who just returned from his before-school *Get Up and Go!* workout. Homeroom begins with an announcement by student peers regarding an ongoing nutrition and fitness message. Today’s fact informs students that each daily 12 oz. can of soda increases the risk of obesity by 60%.

Max grabs a breakfast bag from his teacher’s desk for his *Breakfast in the Classroom*. Today’s breakfast includes milk, cereal, and fruit. After eating a healthy breakfast, Max feels well prepared for his day of learning and activity. Since breakfast was integrated into the classroom, Max has had fewer trips to the school nurse and his teachers have reported decreased tardiness, better attendance rates, more attentive students, and fewer disciplinary problems.

Period 1: Math

Settled in first period, Max enjoys putting measurement skills into practice. Today his teacher demonstrates measurement of ounces in relation to food portion sizes. Max has been taught that kids need to limit fats and sugar intake, and he now understands what constitutes a serving. He also learns about grams and calories in relation to food intake versus energy expenditure: the energy equation.

Period 2: Geography

Today Max learns the geographical origin of some spices new to him: fennel, cilantro, and rosemary. The geography teacher is preparing his students for next week’s *Chefs in the Classroom* activities. Max is excited about learning how to cook. He is used to eating convenient packaged lunches: those that tend to make him really thirsty. Max’s teacher says the visiting chef will show them how to make easy lunches that are healthy and that feature many spices besides salt.

Morning Break

Between periods, Max eats the whole grain fruit bar his mother placed in his book bag. He didn’t know that whole grain bars were just as good as toaster pastries until he sampled them during last week’s *FUN (Fitness Unites with Nutrition) Week*. He pointed them out to his mother at the grocery store. She likes them also.

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Period 3: Reading

Max feels more awake during reading class today. It's been a month since Max's teacher sent home a note about Max falling asleep in class.

Period 4: Science

Today Max learns about systems and examines the sub-systems that make the bicycle work. He looks forward to helping his little sister ride a bike this weekend.

Pre-lunch Activity

Today Max and his peers play "Capture the Flag" for 15 minutes before lunch. More fit than last year, Max almost captures the flag for his team.

Lunch

Max meets his buddies in the cafeteria. They glance at the à la carte line and are pleased to see the trail mix they taste-tested in the cafeteria last month. Max brought his lunch today, so he buys a bottle of milk from the dairy vending machine.

Period 5: Social Studies

Today Max learns about the "economics of pop." His teacher shows the class a graph that traces soft drink sales since well before Max was born. She points out that mean soft drink consumption has increased by 41% between 1989-91 and 1994-95, and that teenagers today drink twice as much soda as milk.

Period 6: Health/PE

Max's teacher starts class by reminding Max and his peers that chubbiness is not something to make fun of but a serious health issue. Max learns about diabetes, a disease he remembers from science class when his teacher introduced the pancreas. After 15 minutes of health, Max and his 24 classmates play a game of soccer.

End of the school day

Max buys a bottle of water from the regular vending machine and heads to football practice. He eats a bag of peanuts and an apple before hitting the field. His friends race home to meet the *Movin' Van*, which supplies them with games and equipment for a game of street hockey.

Middle schools today strive to become academically excellent, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable in their quest to become high performing schools. Focusing on adolescent health issues is a part of that quest. It will take a coordinated effort and commitment from all stakeholders in the school and community

Taking Action for Kids

Schools can take action for healthy kids by restructuring the school and providing programming options that meet the needs of the young adolescent learner. State and national initiatives are underway to support schools in their efforts. Two such efforts are the Health Promoting Schools Project and the Action for Healthy Kids Initiative.

The Health Promoting Schools project is a collaboration of NMSA, the Comprehensive Health Education Foundation, the CDC Division of Adolescent School Health, and other organizations. The goal of the project is to improve academic achievement of students by enabling middle level schools to examine school culture, environment, and health-related curricular offerings and develop action plans to address identified needs. Support is provided at no cost to schools or districts.

The Action for Healthy Kids Initiative was launched at the Healthy Schools Summit. Action for Healthy Kids state teams of school administrators and educators, health professionals, government and student leaders, concerned parents, and community and business leaders are taking actions at state, district, and school building levels to promote change in schools across the country. You can locate your state team's contact person for ideas or to offer your support at www.actionforhealthykids.org/teams/index.htm.

Some schools may want to go beyond the fundamental call of duty by integrating programs based on the "What's Working?" models referenced through the "Day in the Life of Max" and described on page 35.

For more information about these and other "What's Working?" programs, visit www.actionforhealthykids.org/tools/whatsworking.htm. We invite you to become part of the solution. ■

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What's Working?

Get Up and Go!

At Prouty Intermediate School in Spencer, Massachusetts, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Healthy Choices Program have made possible a before-school workout program called Get Up and Go! According to Spencer East Brookfield School District Health Curriculum Coordinator Maryanne Hammond, the program has been so successful over the past three years that now 90 percent of students participate. Dropped off at school at 7:30 a.m. by parents (who love how the program fits into their work schedules), students rotate through donated cardiovascular equipment. A Healthy Brunch caps each trimester of the program to celebrate students' success. Teachers support the program, too, as they have reported more awake and attentive students throughout the day.

Breakfast in the Classroom

Many school districts across the country have introduced Breakfast in the Classroom programs, often funded by state and regional dairy councils. Harrisburg (PA) City Schools District Food Service Director David Lloyd praises the immeasurable results of his district's homeroom breakfast program, which is well supported by his district's principals. Breakfast is served daily via insulated bags in the classroom. Teachers support the program, attributing decreased tardiness, increased attendance, and improved attention among students. Since implementing the program, the district has seen breakfast participation increase from 37 percent to more than 85 percent.

FUN (Fitness Unites with Nutrition) Week

As part of its Principal's Pledge for Good Nutrition, Bettendorf (Iowa) Middle School hosts a week of fitness and nutrition activities. School Nurse Jo Mecham and Food Services Director Cindy Jacobson work collaboratively to advance this pledge via contests, multi-disciplinary curricular activities, calcium promotion activities, a FUN Week theme song created by a teacher, high school student ambassadors, open gym night for students and parents, healthful foods taste tests, assemblies with community and high school role models, and other activities. The purpose of FUN Week is to kick off Bettendorf's year-long commitment to good nutrition and fitness. Since implementing its Principal's Pledge and FUN Week, Bettendorf Middle's students are drinking less soda and 15 percent more milk.

Chefs in Classroom

This Los Angeles Unified School District Nutrition Network program brings chefs into the classroom to facilitate healthy eating by teaching kids how to make healthy dishes that appeal to them. Program Coordinator Susan Singer discovered that when kids are able to take ownership of what they make, they care more about what they are eating. The Chefs in the Classroom program also integrates good nutrition throughout the curriculum. For more information, visit www.lausdnutnet.org/programs/chefs.html.

Movin' Van

Recognizing that there were no kids outside after school in low income neighborhoods in Graham, North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the Graham Recreation and Parks Department piloted its Movin' Van program to bring equipment and physical education instruction to kids who otherwise couldn't participate in after school parks and recreation activities. Program Director Kymm Ballard enjoys the fact that "kids run after the van as if it's the ice cream truck!" Not only have the students benefited from this after school program, parents have as well, as they join their kids in this exciting activity hour at least three times a week. ■