

News Release

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Schools Promote Healthy Eating In and Out of the Classroom

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires each school or agency who participates in the National School Lunch Program to write a school wellness policy by the first day of school in fall 2006. The policy must include two components: nutrition education and physical activity. Schools either already have or are currently forming committees to address the type of policy their system wants and needs. Involving teachers, administrators, families, community leaders, and students in delivering strong, consistent messages about healthy eating is part of a coordinated school health program.

Why is there a need for a school wellness policy? Among other reasons, obesity can be linked to the lack of physical activity and poor eating habits. Health professionals are seeing an increase in the number of children who are obese throughout the state, the nation, and even more alarming, in our County. Overweight and obese children are experiencing the same kinds of problems normally attributed to adults including diabetes and heart disease.

We know that students learn about healthful eating and apply what they learn as they choose food and beverages at school. Classroom instruction on nutrition and health can be strengthened or sabotaged by food and beverages that are made available during and after school.

Research has shown that improving a school's food environment can have a positive effect on the quality of students' diets. School cafeterias are the most visible part of the school food environment, but opportunities to offer healthful food and beverage choices don't stop in the cafeteria.

Following are ways to enhance the quality of foods and beverages at school:

- Feature whole-grain foods, low-fat milk and fresh local produce for lunch, ala carte options, and breakfast.
- Freshly cut-up fruit is a wholesome alternative to cookies and candy for treats in the classroom.
- When vending machine contracts are negotiated, add nutritious items such as water, milk, juice, fruit, nuts, bagels and yogurt. Also feature them in the school store and concession stands for athletic events.
- Consider rewards given in a spelling bee or neatest desk competition. Replace candy and fast food coupons with non-food rewards. In a recent survey of Madison middle schools, students' favorite rewards were free time or games in class, outdoor activities, and tokens for prizes. Other options are movie coupons, stickers, and selecting a topic for an art project or writing assignment.
- Many after-school programs offer snacks. Smoothies, cheese and crackers, mini sandwiches, or cut-up vegetables with dip are nutritious and satisfying.
- Schools that accept advertising to support school equipment and functions should have a process for examining the health and nutrition impact of in-school promotions.

Several health, education, food, and exercise professionals are involved in the KIDS CAN (Coalition for Activity and Nutrition) group which meets regularly to help address the nutritional and physical needs of children. We have sponsored meetings to inform school administrators, nurses and cooks about the wellness policy requirements. As parents and concerned residents, please voice your thoughts about what you think are important areas of improvement. Also, encourage the people working on the policy to maintain current efforts that reflect healthy eating and exercise.

The next time you visit a school and find yourself in front of a concession stand or pass a vending machine, take a look at what kids have for food choices. If you feel strongly about what you see, be confident that the Wellness Committee members at that school would like to hear your opinions. Contact your school's principal or district administrator and offer to help develop or update their wellness policy.

In the meantime, do what you can at home. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), establishing healthy eating habits at a young age is critical to proper growth and development. It also makes it more likely that beneficial habits will continue into adulthood. In addition, healthy eating helps children do well in school and it helps prevent health problems in later life, including diabetes, heart disease, cancer and stroke.

The Action for Healthy Kids web site, www.actionforhealthykids.org, features a "What's happening in your state?" link with information about activities to promote health in Wisconsin schools.

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