

Policy Extract

[Preventing childhood obesity: health in the balance](#)

The Institute of Medicine Committee on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth was charged with developing a prevention-focused action plan to decrease the prevalence of obesity in children and youth in the United States. The primary emphasis of the committee's task was on examining the behavioural and cultural factors, social constructs, and other broad environmental factors involved in childhood obesity and identifying promising approaches for prevention efforts. The plan consists of explicit goals for preventing obesity in children and youth and a set of recommendations, all geared toward achieving those goals, for different segments of society.

Schools

Schools are one of the primary locations for reaching the nation's children and youth. In 2000, 53.2 million students were enrolled in public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Many of these schools are also locations for preschool, child-care, and after-school programs in which large numbers of children participate.

The school environment has the potential to affect national obesity prevention efforts both because of the population reach and the amount of time that students spend at school each day. Children obtain about one-third of their total daily energy requirement from school lunch (USDA, 2004a), and should expend about 50 percent of their daily energy expenditure while at school, depending on the length of their school day. Given that schools offer numerous and diverse opportunities for young people to learn about energy balance and to make decisions about food and physical activity behaviors, it is critically important that the school environment be structured to promote healthful eating and physical activity behaviors.

Increasingly, schools and school districts across the country are implementing innovative programs focused on improving student nutrition and increasing their physical activity levels. Parents, students, teachers, school administrators, and others play important roles in initiating these changes, and it is important to evaluate these efforts to determine whether they should be expanded, refined, or replaced and whether they should be further disseminated.

It is acknowledged that the school environment is complex, and schools face many economic and time constraints on their ability to address a broad array of student needs. Further, many food- and physical activity-related policies and practices are linked at multiple levels. A change in one practice may impact other areas of the school environment, either related directly to food or physical activity or indirectly to other areas (such as academic, extracurricular, financial, or administrative). The recommended actions, described below, therefore, were developed with the goal of being implemented concurrently and not as stand-alone strategies. Moreover, these actions should reinforce and support each other not only in the schools but in other settings, including the community and home environments.

Recommendation

Schools offer the opportunity for reaching large numbers of young people, during a significant part of their day, and throughout much of the year. Furthermore, schools present opportunities, both in and out of the classroom, for the concepts of energy balance to be taught and put into practice.

Schools should not only provide educational messages about nutrition, physical activity, and reducing sedentary behaviors, but should reinforce and support these concepts throughout the school environment.

Recommendation 9: Schools

Schools should provide a consistent environment that is conducive to healthful eating behaviours and regular physical activity.

To implement this recommendation:

USDA, state, and local authorities, and schools, should:

- Develop and implement nutritional standards for all competitive foods and beverages sold or served in schools
- Ensure that all school meals meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans
- Develop, implement, and evaluate pilot programmes to extend school meal funding in schools with a large percentage of children at high risk of obesity

State and local education authorities and schools should:

- Ensure that all children and youth participate in a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity during the school day
- Expand opportunities for physical activity through physical education classes; intramural and interscholastic sports programmes and other physical activity clubs, programmes, and lessons; after-school use of school-facilities; use of schools as community centers; and walking- and biking-to-school programmes
- Enhance health curricula to devote adequate attention to nutrition, physical activity, reducing sedentary behaviours, and energy balance, and to include a behavioural skills focus
- Develop, implement, and enforce school policies to create schools that are advertising-free to the greatest possible extent
- Involve school health services in obesity prevention efforts
- Conduct annual assessments of each student's weight, height, and gender- and age-specific BMI percentile and make this information available to parents
- Perform periodic assessments of each school's policies and practices related to nutrition, physical activity, and obesity prevention Federal and state departments of education and health and professional organisations should:
- Develop, implement, and evaluate pilot programmes to explore innovative approaches to both staffing and teaching about wellness, healthful choices, nutrition, physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviours. Innovative approaches to recruiting and training appropriate teachers are also needed