WEIGHING IN
Practical Steps Schools Can Take to Improve Student Health and Academic Success

CHILDREN'S ACTION ALLIANCE
A Voice for Arizona’s Children since 1988
THE ISSUE

The word “youth” evokes images of vitality, energy, resilience, and health. But today the effects of being obese or overweight mar those images for nearly one out of three children in Arizona. And the loss of health and energy affect the learning of children in school.

A child is considered “obese” or “overweight” based on his or her body mass index (BMI) compared to children’s BMI measurements collected by the Centers for Disease Control over several decades. These measurements were published in the Centers for Disease Control Growth Charts in 2000 and include nationwide measurements of children from the mid 1960s through the mid 1990s. If a child today has a BMI greater than 95% of the children of the same age and gender in that multi-decade data base, he or she is considered obese. If a child has a BMI greater than 85% to 95% of children of the same age and gender, he or she is considered overweight.

Childhood obesity afflicts nearly 18% of Arizona’s children, with an additional 13% overweight.1

Arizona’s childhood obesity rate is now higher than the national average, placing Arizona’s children at severe risk for developing poor health.1

The consequences arising from childhood obesity are vast and complex. Type 2 diabetes, orthopedic problems, and cardiovascular disease historically occur as people age. Yet these conditions are being seen more frequently in overweight and obese children. Seven out of ten obese children exhibit at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Type 2 diabetes is primarily caused by unhealthy lifestyle choices. It is now estimated to account for upwards of 45% of newly diagnosed cases of all pediatric diabetes.3 The worst of these numbers are seen in American Indian youth where Type 2 diabetes consists of 90% of new pediatric diabetes cases.4 Without changes, this generation could be the first not to outlive their parents.

In addition to physical consequences, the psychological damage of obesity can have a lasting effect on a child. Social exclusion, ridicule, and low self-esteem are likely to be part of an obese child’s normal day.

According to the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nationwide child obesity rates have skyrocketed within the last thirty-five years. Overall childhood obesity rates more than tripled from about 5% to nearly 17%. Even pre-school aged children saw dramatic increases in obesity rates during the period.4

The rapid rise of obesity in Arizona is even more astounding. Between 2003 and 2007, childhood obesity in Arizona grew faster than in any other state. In these four years, rates climbed from 12.1% to 17.8%.1

The table below compares 2007 rates of obese and overweight children nationally and in Arizona. The map (at right) shows how Arizona compares to other states.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends all children engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per day. Without a daily physical education class in the average school day, many children will achieve only 10-20 minutes of physical activity. This is a key reason that nearly three out of four children in Arizona are not meeting the CDC’s recommendation. Instead of active sports or play, many children sit stagnantly in front of a television for more than 3 hours per day, contributing to obesity and overweight.6

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HEALTHY ARIZONA

The Healthy Arizona 2010 plan developed by the Arizona Department of Health Services includes the following objectives and strategies to increase children’s physical activity and improve nutrition:

1. Increase the proportion of children who participate in cumulative intermittent physical activity for 60 minutes per day.

Strategies

- Require and increase time spent in physical education.
- Provide funding and equipment to promote physical activity in schools.
- Emphasize participation in lifetime activity.
- Integrate physical activity into the school day by incorporating physical activity into classes.
- Require and increase school time, such as recess and regular activity breaks throughout the school day, for unstructured physical activity.
- Promote safe spaces and facilities for physical activity (including safe routes to increase walking to school and safe after school play places).
- Provide and promote after school programs that foster physical activity.
- Provide and promote intramural programs that offer diverse, developmentally appropriate physical activities, both competitive and noncompetitive.
- Increase the qualifications of teachers, coaches, recreation, health care staff, and other school personnel to promote enjoyable, lifelong physical activity among children.

2. Increase the proportion of adolescents who engage in either moderate or vigorous physical activity.

3. Increase the proportion of persons aged 2 years and older who consume at least two daily servings of fruit and at least three daily servings of vegetables, with at least one-third being dark green or deep yellow vegetables.

Strategy

- Promote increased consumption of fruits and vegetables in schools through classroom education, food service, activity/sports programs and parent education.

4. Increase the proportion of children, adolescents and adults who are at a healthy weight.

SCHOOL POLICIES CAN TIP THE SCALES

The policies and practices of public schools in Arizona can be key in reducing childhood obesity. Children spend much of their day at school and eat at least one meal during the school day. The amount of physical activity children have during the school day and the quality of nutrition of lunch they eat at school can go a long way to shaping children’s health. These activities can also shape their health habits for the rest of their week and the rest of their lives.

RESEARCH LINKS IMPROVED STUDENT HEALTH TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The benefits of a healthy lifestyle stretch far beyond the physical. Existing evidence-based research suggests that better dietary choices and increased physical activity can lead to increased academic performance. This, in turn, can fuel a lifelong cycle, leading children into a healthy and successful future. Findings from the latest studies are highlighted below.

U.S. CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

- Students who earn A’s are nearly twice as likely to meet physical activity recommendations on 5 or more days per week than students who earn D’s and F’s.
- Students who earn D’s and F’s are more than twice as likely to watch television 3 or more hours per day than students who earn A’s.
- Increasing a child’s daily physical activity is linked to better test scores, and appears to have no adverse effects on their education.

CALIFORNIA YOUTH FITNESS STUDY

- As student physical fitness scores increase, so do academic test scores.

TEXAS YOUTH FITNESS STUDY

- Higher levels of physical fitness are associated with higher test scores and increased attendance.

NEW YORK CITY FITNESSGRAM STUDY

- Better scholastic performance is connected to higher fitness levels.
- No matter a child’s weight, increased physical activity levels are associated with higher fitness and test scores.

AZ DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION’S PHYSICAL EDUCATION PILOT PROGRAM

- Increasing time allotted for Physical Education has no negative effect on AIMS scores.
- The addition of classroom activity breaks, active recess, family events and daily Physical Education can increase weekly physical activity, improve student perception of physical activity, boost school attendance and decrease nurse visits.

NUTRITION’S ROLE IN COGNITIVE FUNCTION

- A compilation of studies shows that proper nutrition can lead to academic achievement.
Analyzing the Research

In June, 2010, the Centers for Disease Control published a report analyzing 50 scientific studies on the link between physical activity and academic performance. The report, The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education & Academic Performance, presents findings about increased physical activity linked with changes in academic achievement, classroom behavior, cognitive ability, and attitude. The CDC concludes:2

1. “There is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores.”

2. “...physical activity can have an impact on cognitive skills and attitudes and academic behavior...”

3. “Increasing or maintaining time dedicated to Physical Education may help, and does not appear to adversely impact, academic performance.”

The CDC’s report includes data about the connection between physical activity and student grades. The following graphs portray data from the 2009 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Of the students who earned mostly A’s, 44% met physical activity recommendations on 5 or more days per week. In contrast, only 24% of students earning mostly D’s and F’s achieved physical activity recommendations on five or more days per week. This data suggests that students who earn A’s are nearly twice as likely to meet physical activity recommendations on five or more days per week than students who earn D’s and F’s. A similar result is found when linking grades and sedentary time in front of a television.9

Greater Physical Activity and Less T.V. Linked to Better Grades in School10

One of the most notable studies reviewed in CDC’s report is a study of nearly 900,000 5th, 7th, and 9th graders in California. Researchers normalized SAT/9 test results to a 99-point scale, “NCES Score”, and then correlated the test scores to standardized fitness scores. The outcomes provide further evidence that increased physical activity is linked to increased test scores. The study yielded the results shown below.4

Academic Test Scores Improve as Physical Fitness Improves

In a cooperative effort, the New York City Department of Health and Department of Education conducted a similar study of 600,000 K-12 students. The study discovered three significant outcomes. First, overweight and obese students performed considerably worse in the fitness assessments compared to children of healthy weight. Second, those who ranked in the middle third for fitness earned better academic grades (16.5% higher) than the grades of students in the lowest third for fitness. The academic grades of the fittest students were even higher, showing a 29% increase above the grades of the least fit students. Finally, the study found that increased academic test scores coincide with increased fitness scores independent of weight status. This shows that no matter a child’s weight, increased physical activity levels are associated with higher fitness and test scores.11

In 2007, the Arizona Department of Education awarded competitive grants to four schools for implementation of The Physical Education Pilot Program, an 8-week Physical Education intervention to observe the effects of increased physical activity among youth. Participating schools were required to provide 150 minutes per week of Physical Education that emphasized healthy lifestyles and physical activity. The program’s final evaluation showed that as levels of physical activity significantly increased, kids’ perceptions of physical activity were positively affected, school absences and nurse visits decreased, and “AIMS scores remained stable even with more time spent in physical activity during the school day.”12

Children must also be well-nourished to learn. Research shows that only 2% of children are consuming the recommended number of daily servings from each food group.13 For this reason, it is important that schools make foods as healthy as possible. Evidence has long existed showing the connection between a healthy diet and cognitive ability. Highly respected studies from the 1980s show that diets low in protein and iron can lead to decreased concentration and lower academic scores.14, 15 More recently, studies have shown that when consuming healthier diets, students perform better on reading and writing tests.16 Even the slightest malnutrition can have lasting effects on a child’s learning ability.17 In one study, researchers monitored the diets and IQs of children over a 5-year span, from age 3 to 8.5. They discovered a drop in the IQ of kids with unhealthy diets consisting of high fat, sugary, and processed foods, and an increase in the IQ of kids whose diets were rich in nutrients.18 Malnourishment can also lead to a weakened immune system.19 Sick kids who miss school will surely be left behind. Without a nutritious diet, children don’t have enough energy to get through the academic rigors of their day.
Cultivating Active School Environments

The 21st century school in Arizona faces shrinking budgets, growing academic expectations, and fewer physical education classes. Despite these barriers, there are a variety of practical and effective approaches schools can take to increase students’ physical activity.

Creating fun environments that champion physical activity is one great way to nurture healthy kids. For example, the Chandler Unified School District (CUSD) has created a variety of games, lessons, and tools to promote physical activity. The district stresses the importance of an active lifestyle, and understands the educational benefits tied to physical activity. Brain breaks using classroom energizers, indoor fitness trails, and signs featuring physically active games to be enjoyed during recess are just a few ways that CUSD engages their children in healthier lifestyles.

School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs) are another useful tool helping to nurture healthy school atmospheres. Comprised of parents, school administrators, teachers, and other community members, SHACs are growing in popularity in Arizona due to their ability to monitor school wellness and create new programs that can enhance the health of each school. Leading the way, Pima County has succeeded in forming over 150 SHACs. Some of their noteworthy accomplishments include: the creation of school “Wellness Week” and a student-friendly health-focused newspaper; inviting guest speakers; implementing nutrition campaigns; and building new walking paths with exercise stations — just to name a few.

One reason for the spread of childhood obesity outside of normal school hours. Joint-Use Agreements between schools, cities, and private organizations transform schools into community centers where neighborhood unity is strengthened and physical activity is championed. For example, a school may agree to open its grounds for public use as long as the local police department agrees to patrol the area. Or, an agreement could be made between the school and a neighboring YMCA to share recreational facilities; among all 50 states, Arizona has the lowest percentage of middle and high schools that open recreational facilities outside of normal school hours.

Menu of Options to Improve Student Health for Academic Success

There is very clear evidence that improved children’s health goes hand in hand with improved academic success. This means that school policies to promote more physical activity and better nutrition not only advance children’s health, but also strengthen academic performance. This menu offers practical steps schools can take to improve student health and academic success. Each menu option below includes websites with information about successful activities and implementation ideas.

Include Classroom Activity Breaks

Activity breaks as short as 10 minutes have been linked to increased mental focus in children. “Classroom Energizers” improve on-task behaviors and encourage students to move around while learning academics.


Create School Health Advisory Councils

School Health Advisory Councils (SHACs) bring together community members, school administrators, and health officials to improve the health of their school. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created a School Health Index which SHACs can use as a roadmap to bring their own school wellness policies to life and enhance the health of the entire school.

• AZDHS supports School Health Advisory Councils. Two videos showing the benefits of SHACs: http://www.azdhs.gov/phs/bnp/nuapao/SchoolWellness.htm

• School Health Index. Assessment and planning modules to help improve coordinated school health: http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/shi/

• Physical Activity and Nutrition Resources from Maricopa County. Links to organizations that help improve physical activity and nutrition in schools: http://www.maricopa.gov/publichealth/Services/Nutrition/resources.aspx

Offer Physical Education

67% of adolescents in Arizona don’t attend daily Physical Education classes, and 57% don’t even receive Physical Education weekly. Physical Education is a prime opportunity for kids to be active and to learn how to live a healthy lifestyle.

• Arizona’s Coordinated School Health Program. Additional resources for teachers, parents, and students; Overviews of physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco prevention recommendations; School health-related data: http://www.healthologyaz.com

• Fitness Beginnings. A collection of fitness videos and CDs geared toward children of every age: http://www.fitnessbeginnings.com
**MENU OF OPTIONS**

**TO IMPROVE STUDENT HEALTH FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

(continued)

### Share and Open Recreational Facilities

To help promote physical activity, schools can open their playgrounds for public use during non-school hours. Joint-Use Agreements between schools, cities, and private organizations transform schools into community centers where neighborhood unity is strengthened and physical activity is championed.


### Create a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program

With Physical Education as a cornerstone, schools can offer ways for students to be active before, during, and after school. Activities can involve staff, families, and communities. School-wide events such as a bike rodeo, turkey trot, or walking school bus, can spread and promote fun physical activity throughout the community.

- **Make the Move: Implementing the National Physical Activity Plan.** Ways for schools to bring physical activity to kids throughout the entire day; National success stories: [http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/ncppa/make_the_move/index.php#/?7](http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/ncppa/make_the_move/index.php#/?7)
- **Wickenburg’s Teach-Back Health Education Program.** [http://www.whahealth.com/SPANing.pdf](http://www.whahealth.com/SPANing.pdf)

### Offer Active Recess

Active Recess with organized physical games can be coordinated by volunteers or community groups. Adult supervision ensures that all students are included and staying active during their recess period. Activities such as capture the flag, hopscotch, and even gardening can result in physical, mental, emotional, and social health improvement.

- **Chandler Unified School District’s Physical Activity Resources.** Classroom Activity Breaks; Recess Activity Ideas; School-wide Events: [http://www.mychandlerschools.org/domain/98](http://www.mychandlerschools.org/domain/98)

Other opportunities involving recess:

- **Offer Daily Recess:** A daily recess with 30 minutes of active play would enhance physical activity in the fight against childhood obesity.
- **Schedule Recess before Lunch:** Research shows that participation in recess prior to lunch builds a child’s appetite and decreases the amount of food waste. Children who recess before lunch are less likely to throw away valuable nutrients in anticipation of play. Well-nourished children then have the fuel to take on the physical and academic rigors of their day.

### Promote Walking and Biking to School

The built environment surrounding a school can have a strong impact on student health. The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) has created the Active School Neighborhood Checklist (ASNC) to help school districts evaluate the walkability and bikeability of the neighborhoods around schools. Using the ASNC for planning and programs can encourage more students to walk or bike safely to school.

- **Active School Neighborhood Checklist.** An assessment tool to find out how walk and bike friendly a school site is: [www.activesschoolchecklist.com](http://www.activesschoolchecklist.com)

### Grow School Gardens

School gardens can bring healthy food to students and teach them both health and academic education, especially in the subjects of math and science. Through hands-on activities, these gardens can give students a new appreciation of nutrition and healthy lifestyles. Schools can serve the produce grown on-site by following the gardening guidelines created by the Arizona Department of Health Services and getting approval from their local health department.

- **National Gardening Association:** [KidsGardening.org](http://www.kidsGardening.org). Helpful tips on school gardening; List of available grants for school garden programs: [http://www.kidsGardening.org](http://www.kidsGardening.org)
** getMenu of options **

**To Improve Student Health for Academic Success**

(continued)

- Bring Healthy Food from Farm to School
  Farm-to-School Programs are a great way to offer children a fresh and healthy variety of food. Following the successful efforts of Litchfield Elementary School District, schools can provide kids with locally produced fresh foods, support the local economy, and educate students about nutrition. The Arizona Department of Education can provide technical assistance. Schools can also purchase fresh local produce using USDA entitlement funds through the Department of Defense Fresh Produce Program rather than out-of-pocket funds.  
  - Department of Defense Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program. Opportunities to receive federal money for purchasing healthy, local produce: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/dod/default.htm  

- Build Complete Kitchens
  It is difficult to serve children healthy, fresh food if a school kitchen is limited in its resources. Simple kitchen remodeling in existing schools and smart kitchen planning in new schools can enhance the health of students. Ensuring adequate prep space and overall size of a school kitchen will allow for preparation of the most nutritious meals.

- Conduct Fitness Assessments
  In addition to recording student body mass index (BMI), schools can conduct annual or semi-annual fitness assessments to learn more about the overall health of their students. Fitness assessments such as FitnessGram® monitor a child’s strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular health to prevent future injury and illness. Fitness assessments should follow the guidelines put forth in the Arizona physical education standards.
  - Former
  - Fitness Assessments promoting healthy kids. A metric for implementing fitness-related health assessments in schools: http://www.fitnessgram.net  

- Arizona Department of Education 2009 Physical Education Standard.
  Standards by grade span for physical education: http://www.azed.gov/health-nutrition/physical-ed-standard/

- Create Opportunities for After-School Play
  Schools have key allies in promoting student health. Schools can partner with the YMCA, city parks, or private organizations to develop after-school programs which engage children in organized active play. Many non-profit organizations are dedicated to providing these services.
  - Former
  - Schools as Centers of the Community. A video showing successful implementation of Joint-Use Agreements and community partnerships with schools: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhrCN4gMWfW

**Looking forward**

Arizonans can eliminate the harmful effects that accompany childhood obesity with involvement from families, community organizations, public policy, and schools. Thanks to past and current efforts, the tide is turning. Childhood obesity rates have leveled off. But children’s health remains far behind the optimum for healthy learning and living. Schools can play a key role in giving children the opportunity for more physical activity and better nutrition while boosting academic success.
REFERENCES


Special thanks to Save the Children and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their support of improving children’s health.

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