



School Wellness

Context

Promoting wellness in schools is critical for a child's healthy mind and body, but it is too often overlooked as a way to enhance academic achievement. No matter how much money a school has invested in the resources for enhancing the education of its students, progress in students' educations will not be made unless the students are able to learn. Obesity, lack of physical activity, and poor nutritional behaviors such as skipping breakfast and eating poor-quality diets are all major barriers to a student's ability to focus and learn in the classroom. With students consuming almost half their daily calories in schools, ensuring access to healthy and affordable meals is essential to the academic success of students, particularly those from low-income families.

In the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, U.S. Congress established a requirement for school districts that participate in federally funded school meal programs to develop and implement a wellness policy that will promote student health and reduce childhood obesity. While the New York City Department of Education has created guidelines to promote student health and reduce childhood obesity (New York City Department of Education 2010), New York City schools still struggle to accommodate large numbers of students in physical education and educate students about nutrition and the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Students who begin these lessons early in their academic careers are more likely to carry these behaviors with them throughout their lives (Basch 2011).

Evidence

Nutrition education and health

Current literature suggests that nutrition education in the school setting may be one of the strategies to improve overall dietary behaviors of students by expanding their nutrition knowledge. Studies have shown a positive association between nutrition education and significant increases in consumption of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, reflective of a healthier diet (Powers, Struempler, Guarino & Parmer, 2009). Schools can also promote healthy eating habits among children by investing in staff and professional education. Teachers, as well as other school staff members, are seen as role models to students (Snelling, Belson & Young 2012). In addition to the education students receive about how to lead a healthy life, it is just as crucial for school staff to continue to set a positive example. Professional development for staff serves as an opportunity for teachers and school administrators to become motivated, encouraged, and educated on addressing nutrition and wellness issues within the school community.

Nutrition and academic performance

Children who are hungry or malnourished will struggle to concentrate, use memory, and make decisions (Share Our Strength 2012). Instead of concentrating on what is going on in the classroom, students are focused on when and where they will receive their next meal.

In New York City, more than 20 percent of children are considered food insecure, and 75 percent of New York City school children qualify for free and reduced price meals (Share Our Strength 2012). A student that has a healthy diet, is physically active, and obtains an adequate amount of sleep may have more cognitive advantages over those students that do not (Basch 2011). School-aged children who eat poor quality diets (i.e., diets with fewer fruits and vegetables and higher in fat) are less alert, have worse short-term memory, and have higher rates of tardiness and absenteeism than children who eat higher-quality diets (Rampersaud 2005).

School breakfast and academic performance

Research suggests that students who do not eat breakfast daily may suffer from a lack of concentration in class. As many as 20 million students in the country that come from low-income families met the criteria for free or reduced-price school lunch in 2011. Of these students, only 9.7 million nationwide ate breakfast at school. Fifty-six percent of teachers that took part in “Hunger In Our Schools: Share Our Strength Teachers Report 2012,” a survey of approximately 1,000 K–8 public school teachers nationwide, said that the majority of students in their classrooms relied on school meals as a primary source of nutrition. Ninety-five percent of students reported on in this survey who ate breakfast were credited with increased concentration, 89 percent with better academic performance, and 73 percent with better behavior in the classroom. Four out of the five teachers in this survey believe that breakfast prevents headaches and stomachaches in their students and those students that eat breakfast regularly are less likely to be tardy or absent (Share Our Strength 2012).

Physical education/increase in physical activity and academic performance

Children who have low levels of physical activity are less likely to be able to focus attention and persist in learning (Florence, Asbridge & Veugelers 2008). Through several research studies as well as comprehensive quantitative syntheses of literature, it has been shown that physical activity may be one of the factors driving students to academic success amongst other positive attributes. Eight of nine studies found a positive association with classroom-based physical activity and “indicators of cognitive skills and attitudes, academic behavior, and academic achievement” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2010). Utilization of the fitness assessment FITNESSGRAM has allowed physical education teachers and school administration to measure the physical fitness of their students through the measurement of a student’s total number of minutes of physical activity each day, periods of time in each day that are spent in physical activity, and the types of activity involved (FITNESSGRAM Website 2013). Assessments of the annual FITNESSGRAM results collected and reviewed by the New York City Department of Education and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene have found that higher FITNESSGRAM test scores are linked to higher academic test scores, with students in the

top 5 percent in NYC FITNESSGRAM scoring 36 percentile points higher on standardized tests than students in the bottom 5 percent (65th vs. 29th percentile) (NYC VitalSigns 2009). This is in line with national data (NYC Vital Signs, Active Living Research). A study linking physical fitness data from the FITNESSGRAM with other outcomes also found that students who were more physically fit had better school attendance rates and fewer disciplinary incidents involving drugs, alcohol, violence, or truancy (Active Living Research).

Physical education classes are a place for students to not only get exercise and engage in physical activity, but also to learn valuable teamwork, leadership, and psychomotor skills that may be utilized in the classroom (Semonian 2012). New York State requires that students in grades K–6 must receive a minimum total of 120 minutes of physical education per week (including daily physical education for students in grades K–3 and physical education at least three times per week for students in grades 4–6). In grades 7 and 8, schools must be able to provide students with physical education three times a week in one semester and two times a week in the other. High schools must be able to provide students with physical education three times a week in one semester and two times a week in the other semester or PE may be provided daily for seven semesters. Although it has been requested numerous times, the New York City Department of Education has struggled to provide the public with the number of schools in New York City that are and are not meeting this requirement.

Bottom Line

To allow students to reach their highest academic potential and support the whole child, schools should place an emphasis on students' health and wellness. Schools can focus on implementing school wellness policies through creating wellness councils that will coordinate with different entities to foster an environment of wellness within the school and address the school's nutrition and fitness concerns. Schools should promote school breakfast programs, incorporate nutrition education into the curriculum, improve the quality of school meals, ensure the required amount of physical education is obtained, and create a school culture whereby teachers and administration are made aware and are interested in playing an active role in helping to minimize the harmful educational consequences of health problems.

Related Research

- Leos-Urbel, J., A. E. Schwartz, M. Weinstein, and S. Corcoran. 2013. "Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes," *Economics of Education Review* 36:88–107.
- Rasberry, C. N., S. M. Lee, L. Robin, B. A. Laris, L. A. Russell, K. K. Coyle, and A. J. Nihiser. 2011. "The Association between School-based Physical Activity Including Physical Education and Academic Performance: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Preventative Medicine* 52:S10–S20.
- Taras, H. 2005. "Nutrition and Student Performance at School," *Journal of School Health* 75:199–213.

Examples of Best Policy and Practice

Alliance for a Healthier Generation

www.healthiergeneration.org

Eat Well Play Hard School-Based Nutrition Education

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/living/school-nutrition.shtml>

New York City Department of Education Office of School Food

www.schoolfoodnyc.org

Physical Ed Plus (PEP)

www.physedplus.org

Prepared by: Bronx Health REACH, www.bronxhealthreach.org

A+ NYC is a coalition of parents, advocates, youth-service, and community-based organizations that have come together to build a vision for New York City public schools under the city's next administration. We aim to focus the next mayor's attention on supporting teaching and learning that prepares all students for fulfilling college and careers, and collaborating with parents, students, teachers, and communities to ensure that every child is guaranteed an excellent education. For more information, visit www.aplusnyc.org or call 212.328.9271.