



School-Based Obesity Prevention Strategies for State Policymakers

Schools play a critical role in preventing childhood obesity. Governors, state agencies, and state boards of education can do much to help them. Below are some strategies that states have used and that have shown promise in helping schools address childhood obesity.

Strategy 1: Coordinate and integrate school health-related programs across state agencies and with nongovernmental organizations.

Many state government agencies and nongovernmental organizations develop and implement school-based programs to promote physical activity and healthy eating. States can maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of these efforts by—

- Strengthening program coordination, integration, and collaboration.
- Aligning program outcomes and priorities across departments.
- Supporting interagency workgroups and budget planning.
- Encouraging agencies to work together to develop and implement state standards and policies.

Strategy 2: Use state and local data to guide decision-making and policy formulation.

States need accurate data about young people's health-related behaviors and school health programs and policies to make the right choices about how to allocate resources to address childhood obesity. States can obtain this information by encouraging schools to participate in data collection surveys, such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (<http://www.cdc.gov/yrbs>) and School Health Profiles (<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/profiles/index.htm>). These biennial surveys, conducted by state education and health agencies in collaboration with CDC, produce a wealth of data on measures such as young people's participation in physical activity and consumption of fruits and vegetables, the content of school vending machines, and schools' physical education requirements.

Strategy 3: Support the development of school health councils and rigorous school health planning processes.

School health councils (composed of representatives from schools and communities) and school health coordinators help establish goals for school health programs and facilitate collaboration on health-related programs. A key task of a school health council is to assess the school's health policies and programs to determine what improvements should be made to meet the needs of students. States can—

- Require school districts to create a school health council and designate a school health coordinator who provides leadership for health-related programs.
- Provide training for school health councils, administrators, and school health coordinators on using research-based self-assessment and planning tools, such as CDC's *School Health Index* (<https://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/shi/default.aspx>).
- Require the integration of school health into required school improvement plans.
- Award mini-grants to schools to implement recommended improvements.

Strategy 4: Establish strong wellness policies.

Strong wellness policies lay the foundation for effective school health programs and are required by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 in school districts participating in federal school meal programs. Wellness policies can mandate physical education requirements, health education requirements, the types of foods and beverages sold on campus, and many other important practices that promote physical activity and healthy eating. States can help schools implement strong wellness policies by—

- Establishing strong statewide wellness policies either through legislation or administrative action by entities such as the state board of education.
- Requiring school districts to develop wellness policies with specific components (e.g., policy language for competitive foods or physical education with a specified implementation plan).
- Developing model policies and guidelines, and encouraging school districts to adopt them.
- Requiring school districts to report to the state on their progress in implementing wellness policies.

Strategy 5: Improve the capacity of school staff through certification and professional development.

Qualified staff are essential to implementing effective school physical activity and nutrition programs. Many schools do not have a trained workforce managing child nutrition services. Qualified physical education teachers are lacking in elementary schools, in part because states do not require or even offer professional certification. The capacity of school staff can be improved in the following ways:

- Offer and require certification for all key positions, including child nutrition directors and elementary school physical education teachers.
- Require a course in health education as part of the professional preparation of elementary school teachers.
- Fund ongoing professional development for school health staff on the implementation of policies and programs proven to promote health-enhancing behaviors.
- Provide professional development in multiple formats (e.g., on-site classes, distance learning, and conferences).

Strategy 6: Establish requirements for how much time students must spend in physical education.

Requiring students to participate in quality physical education classes for specific time periods results in meaningful and consistent contributions to the total physical activity that young people need to enhance their health. Sufficient time in physical education can enable students to develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and confidence needed to adopt and maintain physically active lifestyles. States can help school districts and schools ensure that students spend sufficient time in physical education by—

- Requiring daily physical education for all students or establishing time requirements (e.g., 150 minutes/week for elementary level; 225 minutes/week for secondary level) that lead to increased amounts of time spent in physical education.
- Requiring school districts and schools to eliminate exemptions or waivers from physical education.

Strategy 7: Set nutrition standards for foods and beverages offered in schools.

Unlike federally regulated school meals, foods and beverages sold or provided in vending machines, snack bars, or à la carte lines are largely exempt from nutritional standards. Consequently, the food and beverage choices most commonly sold as snacks in schools are low in nutritional value and high in fat, sugar, and calories.

Schools should reinforce the nutrition lessons they are teaching students in the classroom with a school nutrition environment that makes it easy for children to make healthy choices. States can help schools establish a positive nutrition environment by—

- Establishing and enforcing strong nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold or offered in schools, such as the Institute of Medicine’s *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools*.¹ This action would essentially eliminate the availability of foods and beverages low in nutritional value and high in calories, fat, sodium, and added sugars.

Strategy 8: Promote high quality health education and physical education.

States can raise the profile of physical education and health education, including nutrition education, by holding schools accountable for student performance in these subjects. The following are some approaches states might take:

- Develop and disseminate standards, curriculum frameworks, and/or curriculum guidelines in these subject areas.
- Encourage school districts to engage in rigorous curriculum analysis processes, using tools such as CDC’s *Physical Education Curriculum Analysis Tool* (PECAT) (<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/PECAT/index.htm>) and *Health Education Curriculum Analysis Tool* (HECAT) (<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/HECAT/index.htm>).
- Include health education and physical education in statewide student assessment systems.
- Include proficiency in health education and physical education on school evaluations issued or required by state education agencies.

Strategy 9: Support student participation in high quality school meal programs.

Student participation in meal programs, particularly breakfast, has been shown to be associated with improved student functioning on a broad range of psychosocial and academic measures. To increase the number of children who participate in school meal programs including breakfast, states can—

- Provide free breakfasts to all eligible students and, if funding is available, to the entire student body.
- Provide technical assistance and mini-grants to train foodservice personnel on preparing and serving nutritious meals that appeal to students at schools with low rates of participation in their meal programs.
- Help schools analyze and overcome barriers related to time and space available for school meal programs.
- Use marketing strategies to promote increased participation in school meal programs.

¹Institute of Medicine. *Nutrition Standards for Foods in Schools: Leading the Way Toward Healthier Youth*. Stallings VA, Yaktine AL, eds. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2007.

Strategy 10: Support opportunities for students to engage in physical activity and consume healthier foods.

Beyond physical education, health education, and the school meal program, schools can give students many opportunities to practice the skills they learn that lead to positive behaviors. States can create these opportunities in the following ways:

- Require regularly scheduled recess for elementary school students.
- Provide grants and technical assistance to help schools implement high quality recess, intramural sports programs, after-school physical activity clubs, and campaigns to encourage walking to and from school.
- Provide grants and technical assistance to help schools distribute fruits and vegetables as snacks during the school day by setting up farm-to-school programs, offering salad bars, and planting school gardens.

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