



Schools

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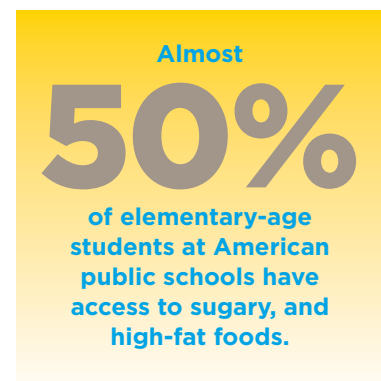
Chicago Public Schools students eating lunch.

Nationwide

With up to half of children’s waking hours spent in school, the policies and practices of schools have a powerful influence on the health and well-being of children and teens. However, the state laws and district policies that shape the daily food, beverage, and activity environments of youth are often inadequate for creating school settings that encourage good health and optimal learning.

Comprehensive School Wellness Policies

Comprehensive school wellness policies are an essential strategy for ensuring healthy school environments are implemented across states and school districts. In 2004 with the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, each school district was required to create a local school wellness policy by 2006. In 2010, with the adoption of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, school districts were required to update their policies to more adequately address nutrition and physical activity as well as to describe processes for monitoring, evaluating, and updating these policies. Some of the key areas to address in wellness policies include nutrition standards for healthy school meals; restrictions on competitive foods (foods sold outside the school meal program); systematic nutrition education; physical activity opportunities before, during and after the school day; and systematic, quality physical education.



Competitive Foods and Beverages

Less than half of all states have comprehensive nutrition standards that reduce sugar, fat, calories, and sodium in competitive foods. Competitive foods include foods sold in vending machines, as dining center à la carte items, in school stores, for school fundraisers, and by mobile food vendors. They also include foods made available through school celebrations, events, and student rewards. Many states that have nutrition standards for competitive foods address only some aspects of unhealthy consumption, often limiting fat and sugar but not overall calories. Competitive food policies are more prevalent at the elementary school level. At the middle or high school levels, policies are more likely to apply to just some, rather than all, sales venues. For example, high-calorie foods may be removed from vending machines but regularly sold within the school community for fundraising revenue.⁽¹⁾



While about half of all states restrict the sale of sodas in à la carte lines at all grade levels, only one state prohibits all sugar-sweetened competitive beverages, including sports drinks, energy drinks, sweetened teas, and less-than-100% fruit juices.⁽¹⁾ Though these alternative beverages might seem like (or be marketed as) healthier choices, they can contain just as much – or more – sugar and calories than soda.

Because school nutrition standards limiting unhealthy competitive foods and beverages are often narrow in their application, if the standards exist at all, most American students are confronted with a barrage of high-calorie, high-sugar, high-fat consumables throughout the typical school day. Ninety percent of public high school students nationwide have access to sugar-sweetened beverages from competitive school-based venues, while three-quarters can purchase sugary or high-fat snacks at school. Approximately two-thirds of public middle school students can obtain sugar-sweetened beverages and unhealthy snacks at competitive school venues. And almost half of elementary-age students at American public schools have access to sugary and high-fat competitive snacks.^{(2) (3)}

The impact of the wide availability of unhealthy snacks and beverages has been well-documented by research. School policies that allow items high in fat, sugar, and calories are associated with increased consumption of unhealthy snacks and beverages and reduced consumption of healthier options. Conversely, policies that restrict or prohibit unhealthy snack foods and beverages are associated with reduced purchase and consumption of these items. A limited, though growing, body of evidence suggests that health-promoting nutrition standards and the associated changes in consumption lead to measurable, positive changes in BMI. One caveat, though – in order for competitive food and beverage policies to be effective, they must be comprehensive. Policies that apply to some but not all venues (e.g., vending machines but not à la carte lines) or some but not all grade levels have a lessened impact on consumption. Similarly, standards that restrict soda but not the full universe of sugar-sweetened beverages are less effective at reducing school-based sugar consumption.⁽⁴⁾

School Meals

In the fall of 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) released updated nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs. The new nutrition standards are intended to make school meals even healthier. Some of the criteria schools must adopt include incorporating at least 50% whole grains, serving more and a greater

variety of fruits and vegetables, switching to low-fat dairy products, and reducing calories and sodium. To implement the new guidelines, districts are working to ensure food service personnel have adequate training, equipment, and revised recipes.

In addition, research has shown that school districts that pilot supplemental activities to complement a strong school meal program, such as school garden or farm-to-school programs, have found an increased preference for and consumption of fruits and vegetables among students participating in these programs. Some school districts are using innovative techniques in the cafeteria, such as placing nutritious products at the end of the line for 'point-of-purchase' items, promoting healthy options through marketing and educational materials, and lowering the price of healthy options.⁽⁵⁾

Physical Education and Physical Activity

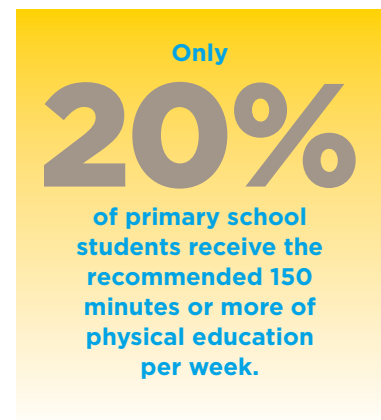
Although the majority of states and school districts nationwide require that physical education classes teach the benefits of a physically active lifestyle, far fewer states actually require that students engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity during their physical education (PE) classes. In fact, not one state requires that students spend 50% or more of PE time engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity. And most policies at the district level are no more rigorous. Less than 15% of school districts nationwide set a minimum standard that all students engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least half of their PE class time.⁽¹⁾

State and district level policies neglect other opportunities for physical activity during the school day as well. Less than 15% of states and districts nationwide require physical activity breaks, and less than 15% of states and less than 25% of school districts require daily recess for elementary schools students.⁽¹⁾

Given the lack of policy-endorsed activity standards, only 20% of primary school students receive the recommended 150 minutes or more of physical education per week.⁽⁶⁾ And while almost three-quarters of primary school students nationwide enjoy 20 minutes or more of recess every day,⁽⁷⁾ students attending schools with high racial and ethnic minority or low socio-economic status populations are less likely than the general population to have the opportunity for daily recess.⁽⁸⁾ Racial and ethnic minority students and students of lower socio-economic status are also less likely to participate in school-sponsored athletics.⁽¹⁾

Research has shown that strong state laws and district policies that encourage physical education and activity are a valuable and powerful tool. Policies requiring moderate to vigorous physical activity are associated with a significant increase in the time students spend engaged in physical education. Likewise, when state laws encourage recess, schools are significantly more likely to have 20 minutes of recess daily. But while stronger laws and policies can be quite effective in increasing students' physical activity, they must be carefully crafted for maximum effect. Studies have shown that as PE participation increases, recess time tends to decrease and vice versa, suggesting that schools are substituting one form of physical activity for the other as policies allow.⁽⁸⁾

In a move to encourage stronger school policies to improve nutrition and increase physical activity, the USDA established the HealthierUS School Challenge. This is a major element of First Lady Michelle



Obama's *Let's Move!* initiative to address childhood obesity and support programming and policies that lead to the establishment of healthy school environments. The program recognizes and rewards schools for meeting high standards in food, nutrition education, physical activity, and physical education and has four levels of recognition: bronze, silver, gold, and gold with distinction.

Chicago

Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the only public school district for the entire city of Chicago, is the third-largest district in the nation. The CPS system includes 475 elementary schools, 106 high schools, 96 charter schools, and seven contract schools. CPS has a student enrollment of more than 404,000, 87% of whom are from low-income families. Students are primarily black (41.6%) and Hispanic (41.1%). White and Asian students represent 8.8% and 3.4% of students respectively.⁽⁸⁾

CPS has made great strides in the past few years to promote healthy school environments across the district. Some of these initiatives, including improved school meals and the creation of the Office of Student Health and Wellness, were developed through a process that engaged health policy experts, strategic partners, teachers, staff, parents, and students.

Building on this momentum, on October 24, 2012, the Office of Student Health and Wellness presented a revised CPS Local School Wellness Policy to the Chicago Board of Education that was officially adopted. This policy sets clear guidelines and establishes required practices to improve the school environment to support healthy behaviors. Some of the key provisions of the policy include:

- Schools must establish a wellness team, led by the Principal and designated Wellness Champion, which is responsible for oversight and implementation.
- School meals must meet CPS nutrition guidelines (equivalent to the HealthierUS School Challenge gold standard).
- School meal program must incorporate parent and student feedback.
- Nutrition education must be integrated into core subjects at every grade level.
- 2/3 of PE time will be spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity and all students are recommended to engage in at least 90 minutes of physical activity during the school day.
- Elementary schools must have 20 minutes of daily recess.

A complementary competitive food policy, the *Healthy Snacks and Beverages Policy*, was adopted by the Chicago Board of Education on November 14, 2012. This policy sets nutrition standards for foods and beverages served or sold on school grounds as "competitive foods." These include foods and beverages sold in vending machines, school stores, by food vendors on school grounds, and as à la carte items. The policy requires schools to prohibit the use of food as a reward and use alternatives such as physical activity. The policy also requires the



principal and Local School Council to establish a healthy fundraising and celebration plan outlining measures the school will take to promote the use of healthy foods. Adults in schools (teachers, administrators) are encouraged to model healthy eating and serve foods that meet nutritional standards.

Although significant progress has been made to date, there are still areas for improvement. For example, while Illinois is one of three states that require daily physical education for its students, the law permits school districts to waive out of the requirement, and many do – including Chicago. Forty percent of Chicago’s high school students do not attend physical education classes in an average week, and just over 40% participate daily.⁽⁹⁾ Some local elementary school students receive 40 minutes of physical education per week or less. With this reality in mind, CPS has committed to improving PE by engaging both stakeholders and PE teachers in setting goals to first improve the quality of existing PE minutes so that in all PE classes, at least 2/3 of time is spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity, and, in the next three years, to add more minutes of PE so that all students participate in an average of 90 minutes per week.

Current Strategies/Progress to Date

CLOCC’s Healthy School Environment Assessment serves as a starting point for many schools seeking to integrate healthier options and behaviors into their environment. The assessment, which CLOCC adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s School Health Index, guides school advocates (teachers, administrators, and parents) through a detailed assessment of a school’s performance in five areas: physical activity and physical education, healthy eating and food access, nutrition education, water access, and family and community involvement. The assessment process helps to clarify a school’s strengths and weaknesses in each of these areas and creates an opportunity for school stakeholders to discuss ideas and resources for addressing them.

CLOCC staff and partners have facilitated the healthy school environment process at over 25 schools to date. Some schools have even achieved national recognition from the HealthierUS School Challenge for exceeding rigorous standards for food, fitness, and nutrition education. CPS and Healthy Schools Campaign are promoting school wellness through the *Go for the Gold* initiative which encourages and supports schools to apply for the USDA’s HealthierUS School Challenge. Since the launch of *Go for the Gold* in 2010, over 100 schools have achieved national recognition for school wellness practices or are well on their way to doing so.

CLOCC created the Healthy Teacher Network to assist and empower teachers in their efforts to create healthier school environments. At semi-annual workshops, teachers learn the latest research linking healthy eating and physical activity with academic success and share best practice strategies, like yoga stretches for in-class activity breaks or nutrition activities, with their peers. Healthy Teacher Network events have been attended by representatives of over 90 Chicago schools from more than 39 Chicago zip codes.

Since the launch of *Go for the Gold* in 2010, over **100** schools have achieved national recognition for school wellness practices or are well on their way to doing so.

Recommendations for the Next Decade

Goal 1: Ensure all schools in Chicago support healthy eating and physical activity for students.



Supervised play at recess at a Chicago Public School.

Objective 1-1: Advocate for and support implementation of comprehensive school wellness policies that include strong nutrition standards for school meals and competitive foods, ensure opportunities for physical activity and adequate minutes of quality physical education, and integrate nutrition education into core curricula.

- **Strategy a:** Assist schools with wellness policy implementation strategies to ensure policies are implemented at the neighborhood-school level.
- **Strategy b:** Create school wellness teams to support wellness policy implementation.

Objective 1-2: Build and increase capacity of various stakeholders including community-based organizations and food and fitness providers to support neighborhood-level schools in creating healthy environments.

- **Strategy a:** Provide technical assistance, training, funding and other support to organizations that implement strategies to improve school environments.
- **Strategy b:** Convene organizations that support schools and/or provide food and activity services and programming to build relationships and collaborations.

Objective 1-3: Identify strategies by which schools can serve as a hub for students, families, and the broader community to access healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity.

- **Strategy a:** Implement, as needed, joint-use agreements between schools and parks that foster community use of school playgrounds.
- **Strategy b:** Expand the use of school property for school and community gardens. (See **Food and Beverage Access** section)
- **Strategy c:** Offer programming at schools for parents and community residents that promotes healthy lifestyles. (See **Health Promotion and Public Education** section)
- **Strategy d:** Promote experiential learning opportunities for students and healthy food marketing to enrich the school food environment through programs such as salad bars, school gardens, farm-to-school, taste test opportunities, 'food-of-the month' strategies, and health-promoting murals, posters, and bulletin boards throughout the school.

Objective 1-4: Increase capacity of school staff to implement physical activity and nutrition education strategies, advocate for healthy school environments, and implement environmental change strategies.

- **Strategy a:** Provide professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel on strategies to promote healthy and physical activity in schools. For teacher audiences, align with curricula grade level goals and common core standards.
- **Strategy b:** Provide financial support to schools to implement environmental changes (e.g., add student fitness centers, paint health-promoting murals in dining areas, install or improve school playgrounds).

Objective 1-5: Implement worksite wellness initiatives at schools to promote and support healthy behaviors for staff (lactation support, access to healthy food, physical activity opportunities) to increase their ability to serve as role models for students. (See **Business Sector and Industry Practices** section)

Goal 2: Improve the food and physical activity environment around schools.

Objective 2-1: Work with food retailers on or near school premises to increase access to healthy food options and decrease access to unhealthy food options.

- **Strategy a:** Implement food access initiative specifically around schools. (See **Food and Beverage Access** section)

Objective 2-2: Implement complete streets recommendations around schools. (See **Physical Activity and the Built Environment** section)

Objective 2-3: Create community coalitions with schools, the police department, and community-based organizations to create a safe environment for children to walk to and from school. (See **Physical Activity and the Built Environment** section)



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