

School Based Wellness Programs: A Key Approach to Preventing obesity and Reducing Disparities

DRA Project Draft Report 08-04

The United States continues to struggle with an obesity epidemic due in large part to poor diet and physical inactivity, leading to increases in cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, hypertension and some cancers. According to the American Obesity Association (www.obesity.org) low-income, minority populations are disproportionately affected by obesity and obesity related chronic diseases. They note that cultural, economic, and environmental factors play a role in diet choices and level of physical activity.

There has been a striking increase in childhood obesity over the last decade. According to NHANES data, the prevalence of being overweight increased by 45% for children ages 2-19 years old from 1988-1994 to 1999-2002. Zhang et al. report that the prevalence of childhood obesity is higher in low-income families; 17.4% of boys in households of low socio-economic status (SES) were overweight in comparison to 9.7% of youth in households of high SES during the 1999-2000 school year. Additionally, minorities are disproportionately affected. In 2002 rates of overweight in children ages 2-19 were highest among boys of Hispanic descent (39.6%) and lowest among non-Hispanic White girls (22%).

School Based Wellness Programs (SBWPs) are promising multi-level programs focused on improving and promoting child health and wellbeing, with an emphasis on physical activity and a healthy diet. There are a plethora of such programs. Many of them are new and have yet to be evaluated, however, the programs that have been evaluated have shown an improvement in diet, increased fitness and dietary knowledge, higher physical activity and improved fitness scores. The Disparities Reducing Advances Project (The DRA Project) has compiled leading programs into "The School Based Wellness Programs Report". This report provides an illustrative catalog of programs with side by side comparisons of how the programs are carried out, who is targeted, what the programs focus on, how long they take to implement and how to obtain the curriculums. Each program is also described in detail.

Based on the findings of this report, the DRA Project makes the following recommendations specific to disparity reduction in childhood overweight and childhood obesity:

- Specifically incorporate a plan to reduce the prevalence of being overweight into all local wellness policies via SBWPs.
- Ensure that wellness is a focus of every school day and that SBWPs are held year round.
- Ensure that children of low socioeconomic status and children of color have access to SBWPs.
- Guarantee that food and activity choices available in schools are culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate.
- Advocate for safe/activity friendly neighborhoods.
- Design, implement, and evaluate SBWPs specifically tailored to disparate populations.

The full report is available at

http://www.altfutures.com/draproject/pdfs/Report_08_04_DRA_Project_School_Based_Wellness.pdf.

For more information on the DRA Project, visit our website at www.altfutures.com/draproject.

"The challenge is not only to anticipate the future, but to create it."

The DRA Project - Institute for Alternative Futures

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