



The Learning Connection

The Value of Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity in Our Schools



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Healthy Children, Healthy Schools

The purpose of this paper is to bring attention to the costs that poor nutrition and physical inactivity impose on our schools. There is mounting evidence that, by taking action to improve these areas, schools can meet performance goals and alleviate financial constraints.

The majority of American youth are sedentary and do not eat well. These unhealthful practices can lead to learning problems in school and health-related problems that may begin during school-age years and continue into adulthood. Perhaps one of the biggest consequences is the risk of becoming overweight. Sixteen percent of school-aged children and adolescents – or nine million – are overweight, a figure that has risen three-fold since 1980. Poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, and being overweight can lead to complications such as elevated cholesterol and blood pressure, gallbladder disease, joint problems, asthma, type II diabetes, depression and anxiety. Between 70 and 80 percent of overweight children and adolescents remain overweight or become obese as adults.

The nation's schools can play a critical role in combating problems associated with poor nutrition and inactive lifestyles. But schools cannot be expected to take steps to address these issues unless it is in their interest to do so.



Action for Healthy Kids™

The Costs to Schools Today

Schools currently bear avoidable or reducible costs due to poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems among students.

Impact on Learning

Many studies show a direct link between nutritional intake and academic performance, as well as between physical activity and academic achievement. For example, increased participation in breakfast programs is associated with increased academic test scores, improved daily attendance, and better class participation, and has also been shown to reduce tardiness. A meta-analysis of nearly 200 studies of the effectiveness of exercise on cognitive functioning found that regular physical activity supports better learning. Other recent studies found a significant relationship between academic achievement and fitness levels. Physical activity in adolescents has consistently been related to higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety and stress — each of which has been associated with better academic performance.

Emerging research also suggests an association between weight problems and lower academic achievement. Perhaps the most obvious reason is increased absenteeism, which has been clearly and directly linked to poorer academic performance. It is probable that students with poor nutrition, inactivity and weight problems have a higher prevalence of physical conditions and psychological/social problems that are frequent causes of absenteeism.

Economic Costs

In addition to the economic toll on our nation, poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems are beginning to take an economic toll on our school systems as well. One burden comes from the potential reduction in funding in the nine states where attendance helps to determine the level of state funding for schools. A single-day absence can cost a district between \$9 - \$20 per student. One study found that severely overweight students miss one day per month or nine days per year (median value). While more research in this area is needed, one can use these figures to develop a preliminary estimate of the potential impact of poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and weight problems on attendance, and thus on school funding in these states. Using an estimate of the rate of absenteeism among overweight students, combined with an average prevalence of overweight students, the extrapolation shows a potential loss of state aid of \$95,000 per year in an average-sized school district in Texas, and \$160,000 per year in an average-sized California school district. The loss in large cities is likely to be much higher; for example, New York City could lose about \$28 million each year, while Chicago could forfeit an estimated \$9 million and Los Angeles an estimated \$15 million.





Data does not currently exist to know the exact proportion of funds lost as a result from absenteeism due to poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems among students. Compelling reasons exist, however, to suppose that a significant proportion of the absences (and thus the loss in state funds) could be a direct or indirect result of these problems. Poor nutrition and inactivity are linked to an increased risk of getting a cold or the flu, while poor nutrition is associated with dental caries; all are common reasons for students to miss school. There is evidence that poor nutrition, inactivity and weight problems may also lead to more days of missed school due to other physical, psychological, and social problems.

Poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems can also indirectly drive up a school's costs. First, schools bear significant costs in helping students whose academic performance and/or behavior suffers because of these problems. These costs include additional staff time spent with these students, but also expenses related to formal remediation programs. Second, schools must spend resources to oversee the administration of prescription drugs to treat students with physical and emotional problems caused by poor nutrition, inactivity, and weight problems. Schools that use administrative staff to administer medications to students could also be exposing themselves to potential legal risks. A third area of hidden costs relates to poor nutrition and inactive lifestyles of school staff. Like most employers, schools are increasingly burdened by the rapidly rising cost of providing health coverage to employees, high levels of employee absenteeism, and suboptimal levels of productivity.

Schools Unknowingly Undermine Their Own Interests

Many school practices and policies related to nutrition and physical activity may be counterproductive to schools' goals for improving academic performance and generating additional revenues. For example, 80 percent of school districts sell foods that compete with school meal programs; most of these "competitive" foods are low in nutrients and high in calories. The availability of these foods can decrease participation in school meal programs that offer more nutritionally balanced foods and beverages. In turn, selling competitive foods may not help (and could even hurt) a school's finances as government funding for school meal programs declines with lower participation. Also, these low-nutrient foods do not help enhance students' readiness to learn. Schools that at least offer more healthful options outside of the meal program are not aggravating students' health and learning and they may be able to offer such options without losing revenues. Some schools, in fact, have even seen gains.

Schools have reduced the amount of time dedicated to recess and after-school physical activity opportunities; few offer daily physical education. Schools have reportedly been cutting back on physical activity and physical education programs, primarily to allow for more classroom time to improve test scores and grades. Yet there is little or no data to support this practice. A growing body of evidence suggests less time dedicated to physical education/activity may undermine the goal of better performance, while *adding* time for physical activity may support improved academic performance.

A Call to Action: Schools as Part of the Solution

The ultimate goal for schools is to provide high-quality education for all students. Combating poor nutrition and physical inactivity can help schools meet this goal by boosting the academic achievement of their students while maintaining (if not improving) their own financial situation. In addition to eliminating counterproductive strategies, schools can offer and promote consumption of nutritious foods and provide opportunities for students to engage in physical activity both during school and in after-school programs.

Just as the problems that have led to poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and weight problems among youth are multifaceted, so are the solutions. Tackling these problems is the responsibility of every individual, every community, and every state in the nation. Therefore, public and private stakeholders at all levels must join together. Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK), a public-private partnership, includes over 40 national organizations and government agencies, that provide guidance to the 51 AFHK State Teams (includes the District of Columbia). These teams are helping schools to find solutions that will help improve students' health and readiness to learn. Action for Healthy Kids calls on schools to include daily physical activity, provide quality health and physical education, increase the availability of health-promoting foods and beverages, and offer more after-school programs providing nutritious snacks, physical activity and nutrition education.





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