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A Shared Leadership Approach to Promoting School Wellness Policy and Program Change

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**A Shared Leadership Approach to Promoting School Wellness Policy and Program Change**

One of the most critical health issues facing students in American schools today is the obesity epidemic. The number of overweight and obese children ages 6 to 11 has more than tripled over the past three decades (Hedley, Ogden, Johnson, Carroll, Curtin, & Flegal, 2004). Health experts predict that children in today’s schools will be the first generation expected to live a shorter lifespan than their parents (Olshansky, et al., 2005). The current and future health of our nation is clearly at risk.

Improving the health status of children is a fundamental component of education in the United States. Guiding students toward healthy and active lifestyles is not a new function for schools. However, in many of today’s schools students have limited opportunities for physical activity, are exposed to school lunches and snacks with little or no nutritional value, and are rarely exposed to health education. Schools have either minimized or ignored health issues and responsibilities to focus on other priorities. The intentions to improve test scores, while legitimately motivated, have resulted in children sitting for unrealistic amounts of time with the expectation of staying focused. This decision has proven counterproductive. When children do not engage in the recommended amount of physical activity, and do not receive proper nutrition, it is likely they will be absent from school more often, have less energy, low self-esteem, and have difficulty concentrating (Grissom, 2005). Research continues to provide strong evidence that academic performance actually decreases with less physical activity (Grissom, 2005; Etnier & Sibley, 2003; Pate, Davis, Robins, Stone, McKenzie, & Young, 2006; Pelligrini & Bohn, 2005; Sibley & Etnier, 2003; Tremblay, Inman, & Willms, 2000). In addition, a study by the California Department of Education (2002) documented that when a substantial amount of school time is dedicated to physical activity, academic performance meets and may exceed that of students not receiving additional physical activity.

Schools alone cannot solve the obesity epidemic. However, it is reasonable to assume that without school policy and program change this present trend will continue. Stakeholders initiating systemic change in our nation’s health status support the belief that schools can and must promote healthy eating habits, quality physical education, and multiple opportunities for physical activity. The purpose of this paper is to suggest strategies of shared leadership between administrators and physical educators along with empowerment of classroom teachers as avenues to promote school level wellness policy and program change.

*School Administrator Leadership*

Recent federal legislation supports the promotion of healthier lifestyles, including physical activity and proper nutrition among school students (i.e., The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004). Members of local school communities (administrators, teachers, parents, students, community leaders, etc.) were urged to serve on school wellness committees to set goals for nutrition, physical activity, physical education, and health education. School administrators are the most influential in establishing school wellness committees and supporting the implementation of the committee goals. Without their support, policy and program change rarely happens. A few examples of how school administrators can be highly instrumental in the overall health and wellness of their school include:

* Requiring and supporting quality teaching in physical education (as is currently expected in core subject areas);
* Increasing physical activity time requirements while taking steps toward incorporating daily physical education;
* Encouraging teachers to provide opportunities for physical activity throughout the school day;
* Promoting and funding before and after school physical activity programs;
* Promoting nutritional lunch and snack programs; and
* Implementing health education as part of the school curriculum.

Contradictory to the need for administrative leadership in the success of school wellness programs, the Action for Healthy Kids report (2008) revealed that school leaders are perceived as being the least supportive. Possible reasons for this include the top-down demands from the district and state levels of meeting the No Child Left Behind legislation, budget concerns, and perceived lack of time in the school day. Following are strategies to aid school administrators in overcoming these barriers:

* Educate district and state officials on the relationship of nutrition and physical activity to school attendance and academic success;
* Encourage the school wellness committee to set simple and realistic, short term, low- or no cost goals that can be easily obtained;
* Encourage and enforce policies that promote increased physical activity (e.g. teachers must include a daily recess period and may not use the elimination of recess for punishment); and
* Celebrate the successes within the school and publicize to the district, parents, and community.

*Physical Education Teachers in a Shared Leadership Role*

The physical education teacher is the ideal “go to” person to take on a shared leadership role with school administrators for the promotion of a school wellness program. It has been argued that the physical education teacher is the best person to take on this role because the physical education teacher is the most qualified to work with students and physical activity, and in many instances has been prepared for similar roles from his/her previous physical education teacher education (PETE) coursework (Beighle, Erwin, Castelli, & Ernst, 2009; Castelli & Beighle, 2007). To encourage a shared leadership role, the school administrator should appoint one physical education teacher as the school physical activity director. Just as high schools have athletic directors for the small population of students that participate in athletics, both secondary and elementary schools need physical activity directors to meet the needs of those not involved in interscholastic sports. With release time and support from the school administrator, the physical activity director leadership responsibilities may include the following:

* Be an active member of the school wellness committee;
* Serve as a resource person for classroom teachers;
  + Inform teachers about the benefits of adding short bouts of physical activity in the school day.
  + Assist classroom teachers with information/resources for providing quality physical activity.
* Organize school-wide physical activity experiences (e.g. field days, fun runs, walking programs, morning exercise routines, intramurals, activity-based fund raisers, and before and after school physical activity clubs);
* Collect weekly data on physical education and physical activity time of each class and report to the school administrator and school wellness committee (with a minimum of 30 minutes daily);
* Promote physical activity opportunities in the community;
* Establish a quality physical education program that provides students with the skills, knowledge and dispositions to be physically active; and
* Provide opportunities for faculty and staff to engage in before or after school physical activity.

*Empowering Teachers*

Establishing and reaching school wellness program goals will involve teacher “buy in” and the promotion of collective responsibility. Evidence supports the idea that teachers positively respond to initiatives where they feel a sense of ownership, support from peer teachers, compatibility of the initiative integrating with their current values and goals, and administrative support (Parks & Lee, 2007). School administrators must empower and support teachers to work collaboratively in establishing a healthy and active school.

The challenge, as in any school initiative, is how to gain the support and involvement of the teachers. One strategic approach is to strive for collective efficacy. Teachers must believe that their involvement can have a positive effect. Some teachers may be motivated by the idea that they can contribute to the overall health status of children. Others will be more motivated by the potential for academic success that may be generated by improved nutrition and increased physical activity. Many teachers will support policy or program change only if they are verbally supported in the process by the school administrator. Regardless of each individual teacher’s motivation, the bottom line is that with collective efficacy, individuals and groups of people are more willing to work toward a common goal. The challenge for the shared leadership of school administrator and the physical activity director is to discover and address the motivation and level of engagement of the teachers.

With classroom teacher “buy in” comes successful implementation of health education and increased opportunities for physical activity. Although there are many ways to promote physical activity during the school day, school administrators should first encourage classroom teachers to play an active role by providing their students opportunities for physical activity outside of physical education class. While classroom teachers should be concerned about providing their students with rigor in the core subjects, they must also recognize that children need integrated bouts of physical activity for continued success in the classroom. There are multiple ways teachers can provide short bouts of physical activity including:

* Starting the day with activity;
* Including a daily recess period;
* Transitioning from classroom tasks with 3-5 minute physical activity breaks (e.g., Energizers found at www.ncpe4me.com);
* Going for a daily walk;
* Organizing and playing active games;
* Teaching simple dances; and
* Integrating physical activity into academics.

While providing additional opportunities for students to be physically active during the school day is a worthy goal, research indicates that outside-of-school physical activity also must be promoted (McKenzie, 2001; Sallis et al, 1997; Tappe & Burgeson, 2004). Examples of ways teachers and administrators can promote physical activity after school include establishing an intramural sports program, providing students with physical activity prompts (i.e., school announcements, email reminders, monthly calendars, posters and bulletin boards in the school, marquees in front of the school), establishing a school health club, and promoting activity at local facilities (Hastie, 2007). Administrators can provide leadership in this promotion process by supporting the physical activity director and empowering teachers to be involved.

One leader cannot be successful in such a large endeavor by working alone. Support is needed from members within the school and school district (i.e., faculty and staff, administrators, district office, school boards, etc.), and stakeholders outside of the school must be encouraged to take an active role in promoting healthy lifestyles among students (i.e., parents, community members, etc.). “Comprehensive approaches that integrate school-based health programs with familial and community efforts are more successful in promoting health than if schools try to do it alone” (Bandura, 1998, p. 20). The small steps discussed in this paper about effective leadership and collaboration may lead to a more comprehensive approach and begin to reverse the trend of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents.

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