

Issue Brief: Healthy Schools

The problem

The problems associated with inadequate childhood nutrition, health and wellness have been clearly defined: approximately 17% of American children are obese, and the rates have doubled in children and tripled in teens over the past two decades. Facing a childhood obesity epidemic, poor student nutrition, insufficient physical activity, and risk of long-term health consequences, there is significant cause for concern. Teaching students to live a healthy lifestyle and making school environments healthier can have a major life-long impact on the well-being of our nation's youth. In fact, health experts agree one of the most effective ways to prevent these chronic diseases is to establish policies and programs to help children and adolescents develop healthy eating and physical activity habits they can maintain throughout their lives.

The solution

In response to the alarming obesity trend, state policymakers are increasingly taking a variety of actions to address the nation's growing waistlines. While some policy approaches fall largely under federal jurisdiction, others are shared with state governments. The policies contained in the "Competitive School Food and Beverage Act" and the "Healthy Schools Act" provide an outstanding opportunity for state leaders to improve food environments and promote the consumption of healthy food and beverages in schools. These model bills will create state standards for competitive foods and beverages (those served outside the federal schools breakfast or lunch programs) in schools by restricting the sale of unhealthy products in vending machines or a la carte lines; and strengthen existing school wellness policies.

"Healthy Schools Act: model state legislation

Federal law required each local education agency to adopt a school wellness policy (SWP) by August 2006 in order to continue to receive funding under the National School Lunch Program. Nationwide, most school districts have complied with this requirement. The federal law, however, contains no requirements for updating SWPs, nor procedures to ensure that SWPs comply with federal requirements and are actually followed by schools. This model bill will give the superintendent of each school district (or another appropriate party) the authority to maintain, measure and evaluate SWPs. Another major complaint about SWPs is that they are not promoted or widely known. This model bill requires SWPs to be posted on each school's website, shared with food service providers and made available in each school's office. In addition, this model bill requires the school district to work with parents, students, food service providers, and community experts to develop or enhance SWPs so that serious thought and consideration will go into their creation, and that all stakeholders are engaged.

Finally, the “Healthy Schools Act” encourages school districts to create universal school breakfast programs and summer food programs. Specifically, the wellness programs will encourage school districts in which more than 50% of students are eligible for free or reduced price school meals to implement a universal school breakfast program to provide a healthy breakfast to all students, regardless of family income. In addition, these same districts are encouraged to explore methods to sponsor a summer food service program for at least six weeks between the last day of the academic school year and the first day of the following school year, and preferably throughout the entire summer vacation.

The universal breakfast and summer food components of the “Healthy Schools Act” were drafted in response to concerns voiced at the National Governor’s Association Fall 2010 meeting. There, several states expressed a need to provide healthy breakfasts for students as well as provide access to healthy meals for needy children during the summer months. Many students who are eligible for free or reduced price school breakfast do not participate because they do not wish to identify themselves as low-income by eating school breakfast. In fact only 44 children eat federally- funded free or reduced price school breakfasts for every 100 who receive free or reduced price school lunch. Providing breakfast at no charge to all students helps to remove the stigma for low- income children of participation in school breakfast.

There are several approaches states have taken to set-up breakfast programs. Some states adopt legislation to provide special state funding for universal breakfast programs. Illinois, for example, funds a universal breakfast pilot program for schools with 80 percent or more free and reduced-price eligible students. Maryland allocated \$1.9 million for school year 2005-2006 for “Maryland Meals for Achievement,” a successful in-classroom universal free school breakfast program, which many states are seeking to emulate. Some states provide additional funding for each breakfast served (California, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin); some provide funding for breakfast start-up costs (California, Illinois and Washington); while others provide additional incentive funds for increased participation in schools that serve high levels of free and reduced-price meals (Colorado, Connecticut, Missouri and Ohio.) Because of the varied approaches states are taking, the legislative language in this model bill allows for school districts to tailor a school breakfast program to fit the specific needs of their schools.