

## Responding to Questions and Concerns

# Making the Case for School Wellness

As you take steps to make the case for school wellness, your audience may have questions or concerns. Here are a few common ones along with some suggested responses.

### 1) We're too busy.

School leaders may agree that school wellness is important, but say that they don't have the time or resources to commit to it. If you plan to do most of the work along with the wellness committee, reassure school leaders that you're not asking for a large time commitment – the biggest thing you'll need from them is their support. Offer suggestions on how staff can be involved if they do have the time or the interest—such as including the wellness team as one of the optional committees for which staff can volunteer. And you can suggest that wellness activities be offered for staff, helping to relieve their stress/burdens.

### 2) Shouldn't we be focusing on academics?

With increasing academic pressures and competing priorities, teachers and administrators may be worried that wellness efforts will take time away from academics. Let them know that there are plenty of ways that physical activity and additional nutrition education can be integrated into classroom lessons (e.g., Active Academics, Brain Breaks, Energizers, etc.). And gently remind them that study after study has shown that healthy kids focus better and learn better – even when wellness efforts do take away from more traditional academic time. (See example in sidebar.)

### 3) It's not the school's job to teach healthy habits; isn't that the parents' job?

It is your school's job to maximize student performance, and studies show that healthy habits lead to increased academic success. And no one expects schools to solve the childhood obesity epidemic alone. There are many forces at work to help kids be fit and healthy – physicians, parents, the community – but schools play a vital role in completing that puzzle. Here's why:

- Schools reach most children and adolescents in a community.
- Schools provide opportunities to practice healthy behaviors - kids spend around 900 hours per year in school.
- Teachers, administrators, school staff and parent volunteers are key role models.
- Schools provide institutional approval for many behaviors related to food choices and physical activity.
- School policies, programs and practices reinforce the behaviors our children are learning.
- State curriculum standards for health usually include nutrition and physical education. Shouldn't our practices and climate reflect those standards rather than conflict with them?

Schools show kids what we value and what is important in our community. In fact, schools often have a much "higher bar" than some families for behavior, conduct, and respect, etc. Why is health any different?



Focusing on wellness **IS** focusing on academics at **Sparr Elementary** in Ocala, Florida, where students saw significant academic gains after the implementation of *Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge* in their school in 2008. The whole Sparr community got involved in regular *Game On!* movement and nutrition challenges starting with fruit and vegetable taste tests and a weekly jogging club.

"The big incentive for me to continue (*Game On!*) is both years that we've done it, our Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) scores went up," says Dr. Kimi West, the school's guidance counselor and *Game On!* Champion - "which tells me eating right and moving more have positive academic results." The students' improved scores boosted Sparr's FCAT grade from a C to a B.

4) **We don't want to break with our school's traditions.**

For example – “we’ve always had an ice cream social to reward our star athletes...or we’ve had a cookie dough fundraiser for the past 20 years.” If our school traditions have a negative impact on student achievement and are teaching our kids unhealthy lifelong habits, it’s time to create some new traditions. When our school began having ice cream parties 20 years ago, chances are that kids had a lot more opportunities for exercise to burn off those excess calories. Not only are many of today’s children overfed and undernourished, few are getting the recommended 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day. We’ve added calories and taken away exercise—a recipe for an epidemic.

5) **But kids like what we're serving them.**

Kids like lots of things that we don't offer them because of the negative consequences – they like to ride bikes without helmets, they like to stay home from school. What about tobacco, beer, etc..? Sometimes it can be hard to remember that kids are not in charge for a reason – we are! It takes time, patience and multiple attempts serving the same new foods to change kids' preferences, but it is well worth the effort – their lives depend on it!

6) **These foods are a part of our heritage.**

Culture change is hard; it takes time and patience. We're not suggesting any heritage should discard its traditions in every setting all the time. But we do encourage healthier foods to be offered on a limited basis and not in the school setting. If foods served and shared at school are healthy options, then parents can be more comfortable offering occasional treats or “whoa” foods (traditional or not) in the home setting because they will have control over the timing and the quantity, and can keep “moderation” as a guiding principle. And sometimes traditional foods can be prepared in a healthier fashion: whole grain pizza with low-fat cheese and vegetable toppings comes to mind. Ultimately, if our traditions have a negative impact on academic performance and student health, why don't we add some new, healthier traditions – no matter what our heritage is? What better place to shape future generations than in a school?

7) **We can't afford any new initiatives – how will we pay for wellness activities?**

Creating a healthy school culture takes time, patience, creativity and perseverance. For some projects, funding is necessary, but those projects don't have to be done all at once, and much can be done without any funding at all (e.g., healthy celebrations and rewards, health promotion, movement breaks, recess before lunch, etc.). And there are frequent grant opportunities out there – or find community partners to help out.

Whether you're in the front office or the classroom or you're the president of the PTA/PTO, use student and community health as a filter when you plan your activities. Do sweets really need to be a part of school activities? Can movement be incorporated in some way? Become a champion for student health – talk it up, start the conversation in your community. Because good nutrition and physical activity are so important to learning and student performance, they should have a prominent place at the table when academic initiatives are being considered – funded or otherwise. When your school community starts to understand how important nutrition and physical activity are to learning, they may be more willing to invest their time and their resources in culture change.

### The Parent Leadership Series

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) is the nation's leading nonprofit and largest volunteer network fighting childhood obesity and undernourishment by working with school communities to improve nutrition and increase physical activity. Parents play a crucial role in creating healthy school cultures. The Parent Leadership Series was developed to provide parents and other community members with tools, knowledge and resources to help kids eat right and move more at school.

Learn more at [www.ActionforHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionforHealthyKids.org)