

Supporting Schools in Creating Healthy School Environments

A parent is the first person a child learns from—you are a role model! Schools and parents need to work as partners at home and school to stress the importance of good nutrition and physical activity for children. Together, you can help your child build healthy habits for a lifetime.

Here is a way, possibly at back-to-school night, to gather more information about what your school is doing to promote health at school. Talk to your principal, school administrator or PTA contact and discuss the questions below.

This is a chance to find out what your school is already doing to provide a healthy school environment for your child. This is also a chance to share your thoughts and ideas about what your school could do to promote healthy food, nutrition education and exercise opportunities for your child.

Encourage health and nutrition education in the classroom. Nutrition education establishes basic skills for healthy habits that children will carry into adulthood. Teaching children about healthy eating and lifestyle choices early is the key to promoting lifelong health and wellness.

Questions to ask:

- Is nutrition education provided in the classroom? Does it teach children the skills they need to adopt healthy eating behaviors?
- Is nutrition education part of the core curriculum areas, such as math, science and language arts, in all grades?
- How much time is devoted to teaching nutrition education in the classroom during the school year?

Support the school's breakfast and lunch programs. Offering children adequate food choices and helping them establish healthful eating habits will make it easier for them to get the nutrients they need to grow, learn and play. Did you know that school lunches must contain one-third of the Reference Daily Intake (RDI) for specific key nutrients, and every breakfast must contain one-fourth of the RDI? School meals must conform to the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans by including nutritious foods and beverages, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat or fat-free dairy foods, in the school meals.

Questions to ask:

- Does the school have a lunch and/or breakfast program for all students?
- Does the school environment allow ample time and space for eating meals?
- Are all foods and beverages available on campus (including vending, concessions, a la carte, student stores, parties and fundraising) during the school day consistent with the current U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans (fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat or fat-free dairy foods)?

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Support daily physical education. Physical activity enhances physical, mental and emotional health. Helping children become successful in whatever activities they choose can boost self-esteem, as well as improve learning. Teachers and parents play an important role in modeling an active lifestyle outside of the classroom.

Questions to ask:

- Does the school provide daily physical education?
- Do elementary school students have at least 20 minutes for recess each day?
- Do students have adequate opportunity to be physically active in ways other than PE class (for example, walking clubs, noncompetitive sports and open gym)?

Coordinate your efforts throughout your school and community setting. The commitment of a single principal or teacher is significant, but there is a greater impact when parents, families and an entire school community focus on creating a healthy learning environment for children. Create a team of educators and parents.

Questions to ask:

- Are all school-based activities consistent with local wellness policy goals?
- Who is coordinating the school district's wellness policy?
- How can I get involved in the school's local wellness policy?

While school programs, educational materials and supportive school environments are necessary to introduce concepts and skills, parents must also reinforce healthy behaviors at home.