

If you walked through most neighborhoods in the city of Cleveland more than likely you will see many overweight children and adolescents. Unfortunately, about 20 percent of urban children are overweight due to poor eating habits and sedentary lifestyles¹. This impacts the health of the city through increased health care costs and disability payments. Since children spend about seven hours of their day in school, urban school districts can play a vital role in promoting a health conscience community with policies and practices that support healthy behaviors. Urban schools should address health and wellness issues including physical activity, proper nourishment, and nutrition education of its students to ensure academic success due to the increased levels of energy and brain functioning healthy living promotes.

Physical activity benefits children and youth in urban schools. Once considered adult diseases, overweight children develop health issues such as high cholesterol, hypertension, and Type II diabetes. Living in high crime areas and perceiving their neighborhoods as unsafe may explain why some low income and minority children and youth tend to be less active. Schools can provide a safe, supervised environment such as on playgrounds and in gymnasiums in which a physical educator can administer structured, research-based activities. After school activities such as cheerleading, drill team, basketball, and so on can serve as a strategy to increase physical activity. Physically fit kids sleep better and handle academic, physical, and emotional challenges much easier. Therefore, physical activity at school can provide safety and fitness, and lead to improved academic, social, and emotional skills.

Students would rather eat chips and drink pop for breakfast and lunch instead of eating healthy foods. Urban schools should expose students to healthy food choices such as fruits and vegetables and encourage students to keep fatty and sugary snacks to a minimum. One way to meet this expectation is through home economics classes that teach children how to prepare delicious and healthy snacks and meals alike. Moreover, teachers can act as role models. If children see teachers enjoying healthy foods,

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm>

then they are more likely to do the same. School cafeterias must serve healthy, yet tasty breakfasts and lunches. By creating repetition of positive memories surrounding healthy foods, the goal is that one day the child will naturally choose foods that are good for him. Eating a balanced diet of fruits and vegetables can boost brain activity and lead to a healthy weight.

More emphasis should be placed on a curriculum that encourages healthy living in light of the health concerns many urban children face. In urban schools, students learn about reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies in isolation. Teachers may argue that devoting part of the curriculum to health and wellness may increase the achievement gap, because time would be taken from reading and mathematics to promote a new curriculum. However, this curriculum would supplement what children learn in their core subjects by exposing them to a cross-curricular approach. For example, a nutrition curriculum can be linked to physical education by showing the relationship between food and physical activity and to social studies by discussing foods in various cultures. The curriculum could include understanding food labels, daily caloric intake, and family health history. A nutrition curriculum would help students make healthier food choices and improve academics.

Urban schools must regularly offer its students physical fitness, healthy food choices, and nutrition education to improve academic performance as well as alleviate some of the health issues that plague urban communities. Physical activity helps students handle physical, emotional, and academic challenges more effectively. Healthy food choices can prevent many preventable diseases. Nutrition classes will help sharpen skills in core subjects as it offer children the opportunity to apply the skills they learn to a different content. With a solid health and wellness program in place, urban schools can expect greater academic progress and less maladaptive behaviors.