
The Columbus Dispatch

Better Nutrition, Exercise Boost Academics

Food for Thought?

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How much do nutrition and physical activity have to do with learning?

Many answers to this important question were provided a few weeks ago when a panel headed by former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher released the report, "The Learning Connection: The Value of Improving Nutrition and Physical Activity in our Schools."

Not unexpectedly, the report hammered obesity as a health problem of epidemic proportions that affects teaching and learning in our schools. The experts emphasized that schools have a huge opportunity and responsibility to "teach and model healthful eating and physical activity, both in theory and in practice."

Panel members examined root causes of childhood obesity and determined there is a "strong link between nutrition, physical activity and academic success." According to the report, "We must understand this important truth: That improving children's health likely improves school performance. It may even help (financially) on the schools' bottom line."

Parents, policymakers and educators have known for a long time that children do not come to school with equal life experiences or family backgrounds. Home situations affect their readiness to learn. Disparities in health and socioeconomic status seem to mirror academic achievement.

While government agencies at the federal and state levels put pressure on schools to improve classroom focused success and close the achievement gap between rich and poor districts, little has been done to affect the eating and exercise habits of our nation's youth. Video games and other electronic amusements reduce the amount of physical activity many students experience in the valuable hours between school and bedtime. The conclusion:

Physical inactivity and poor nutrition among children create a significant roadblock to school-reform efforts that focus on academic performance.

In Ohio, the nonprofit Children's Hunger Alliance has been working with legislators, policymakers, business leaders and faith-based communities for long-term solutions to hunger. The alliance helps provide "food and education for children today so that those most in need have resources to succeed." It also is busy engaging community leaders to expand the use of child-nutrition programs, an important safety net for children.

Schools are in a unique position to assist families in promoting good nutrition and exercise among children. Many students get two of their daily meals from their school cafeterias, where improvements still need to be made in nutrition. SchoolMatch has examined school food-service areas throughout the nation and makes the following recommendations:

- Prepare meals "just-in-time" to minimize holding time and assure that food is served at the highest quality level and nutrient profile is not compromised.
- Bid on food items only after conducting extensive taste testing and evaluating nutrition, meal components, consumer acceptability, packaging and holding time.
- Be certain that portions are adequate and have consistency and visual appeal.
- Reduce the stigma associated with free and reduced-price meals.

Some school systems are working hard to adhere to U.S. dietary guidelines. Others are scheduling additional physical education and recesses and are offering healthier foods.

Communities, government agencies, parents and school leaders are working together to find solutions to nutrition and exercise disparities among children. We have a major task ahead to improve this vital contributor to student success, but continued focus will result in progress.