

School-Based Health Centers and Childhood Obesity: An Ideal Location to Address a Complex Issue

One of today's most pressing public health problems is the rise in childhood overweight and obesity. School-based health centers (SBHCs) – the convergence of public health, primary care, and mental health in schools – represent an important element in our public health toolbox for combating the challenging epidemic. When working side-by-side in a school setting, medical and mental health professionals have a unique window into their patients' world and unparalleled opportunities for addressing common and emerging health problems from a distinctly population-based approach.

Why SBHCs?

Schools are one of the most natural social settings for a child-focused healthy intervention

- By locating health services directly in a school, health visits become a normal part of school life, especially for kids who may feel stigmatized by their disease, require management of chronic health problems, or lack routine access to a health care provider.
- Located in areas where families have limited income and health care access, SBHCs are uniquely positioned to care for many of the kids who are most at risk for obesity and its secondary effects.

SBHCs treat overweight comprehensively

- Medical management is a critical contribution of SBHCs: medical providers can screen and evaluate problems with proper laboratory testing and referrals to specialists when required. For students with medical complications related to obesity such as Type 2 diabetes, SBHCs can work collaboratively with specialists and primary care providers to teach the student about self care and monitor the student's condition.
- SBHCs can organize groups of high-risk kids to help foster cohesion and peer support toward healthy lifestyle goals. Many SBHCs creatively integrate their services into after-school physical activity promotion programs that kids like, are fun, and have incentives built in.
- The interdisciplinary SBHC team ensures that the emotional risk factors for obesity and overweight – depression, stress, and low self-esteem – are not overlooked. The team also works to change behavior through nutrition education, counseling, and encouragement of physical activity.
- By offering families support, encouragement, and materials, SBHCs enhance the efforts of the children to live healthy lifestyles, while involving parents and encouraging them to do the same.

SBHCs can monitor results

- SBHCs are natural evaluation sites for monitoring the effectiveness of strategies to prevent obesity and improve nutrition and health. With the student body captive, SBHCs are able to track progress over time with greater ease.

SBHCs work collaboratively with community providers

- SBHCs work with the school and community to foster collaborative models for preventing obesity and encouraging healthy lifestyles, whether incorporating a nutrition education program into the school's curricula, promoting healthy food choices and exercise, or providing daily encouragement to the school community to eat healthy and stay fit.

Dancing at Lincoln High

*How can I possibly lose weight? I don't want to exercise!
Vegetables? – I never eat them.*

These are sentiments all too commonly expressed by overweight young people. School-based health care professionals at Lincoln High School in Denver, Colorado heard these reactions and more from teens wanting to trim down, but finding the medicine tough to swallow. But after the school-based health center at Lincoln High launched an obesity management program, things began to change for a group of obese kids who thought they couldn't lose weight. Through the power of peer support, facilitated by a health care professional and nutritionist, the group of students, who weighed an average of 300 pounds, started to think differently about the food they eat and no longer skipped breakfast. They role played how to be resolute in their decisions about food. They began to enjoy exercise by strapping on pedometers to see who could walk the most each week. The students discovered that dancing, especially, is something they enjoy and it helps improve their health.

With the support of their families and each other, these kids are taking control of their health and making changes. Now they are saying "Fruits and vegetables aren't so bad." And, "Dancing is a really fun way to exercise!"