

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVES IN SCHOOLS

## BACKGROUND

Childhood and adolescence periods are typically healthy ages. However, behavioral patterns established during these developmental periods help determine young people's current health status and their risk for developing chronic diseases in adulthood. Current research shows there are a number of adult health and medical condition pre-disease pathways that have their beginnings in childhood as well as adolescence.

Along with the family, schools play a major role in the psychological, physical, social and intellectual development of young people in the United States. More than 95 percent of young people aged 5–17 years attend school for approximately six hours a day for up to 13 years. As a result, the school environment is in a unique position to role model and support the adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors that are critical to youth becoming healthy, productive adults.

Benefits of a healthy school environment are well-documented:

- Improved attendance of students and staff
- Improved academic performance
- Improved classroom behavior
- Increased graduation rates
- Motivated school staff
- Increased community connectedness

## CURRENT SITUATION

Data from the 2010 Minnesota Student Survey shows that many Hennepin County sixth-, ninth- and 12th-grade students are not meeting recommendations for healthy eating and physical activity. These are protective behaviors for preventing overweight/obesity and the onset of chronic conditions. Among ninth-grade students:

- 16 percent of male and 30 percent of female students report no milk consumption on the previous day.
- 50 percent of male and 36 percent of female students report drinking at least one glass of soda on the previous day.
- 20 percent of students report eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables the previous day.



- 38 percent of male and 50 percent of female students report exercising fewer than five days in the previous week for a combined total of 30 minutes each day, which is half of the recommended level of physical activity for youth.
- 25 percent of male and 15 percent of female students are overweight or obese based on self-reporting of height and weight.

## PUBLIC HEALTH ROLE

Schools are concerned about their students' health but experience competing priorities that may result in decreased resources for promoting well-being. Public Health Promotion can play a major role in helping schools address this barrier. Staff can provide technical assistance, current research, program materials, and networking opportunities to facilitate the development of strong school wellness policies, practices and programs.

## OUTCOMES

In partnership with school districts, Public Health Promotion has achieved:

- Healthier school lunch options.
- Safer routes for walking or biking to and from school.
- More physical activity breaks during the school day.
- Stronger tobacco prevention policies.
- Healthier school celebrations.
- Increased use of classroom nonfood rewards.



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