



clean environment, healthy children, better education

Health and Wellness in Chicago Schools

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) is a nonpartisan not-for-profit organization that works nationally and at the state and local levels to improve and prioritize student health in the school environment. HSC has a special focus on Chicago schools and the district's low-income minority students. In Chicago, HSC focuses on creating healthy school environments and advocating for district policies that have a positive impact on students and address the health crises of childhood obesity and asthma.

The link between health and learning is clear. Healthy students are better learners, and strong education policy must incorporate provisions that encourage and support schools' efforts to promote student health and wellness. HSC recommends that the mayor-elect prioritize and promote policies and programs that support health and wellness in CPS schools.

Background: School Health and Student Achievement

Over the last 15 years, studies have consistently documented the powerful connection between health and academic achievement. Healthy, active and well-nourished students are more likely to attend school and be engaged and ready to learn, yet many students come to school with one or more health problems that compromise their readiness to learn. The health of our nation's students has a direct impact on academic performance, attendance, school dropout rates, school revenues and the ability to reach achievement goals.

In his report *Healthier Students are Better Learners*, Charles Basch of the Teachers College at Columbia University details the seven health disparities that disproportionately affect the educational opportunities and outcomes of minority youth: vision, asthma, teen pregnancy, aggression and violence, physical activity, breakfast, and inattention and hyperactivity. Unless these health disparities are addressed, efforts to close the educational achievement gap will be compromised.

Given that these seven health disparities can be addressed within the school environment, it is critical for the next Chicago Mayor and the Chicago Board of Education to make student health a key component of the ongoing discussion about education policy. By doing so, policymakers will increase the chances of successful academic outcomes for all students.

Current Status of Health and Wellness in Chicago Schools

CPS has taken a number of steps to improve student health and wellness, particularly around healthy eating and physical activity. Milestones include:

- **Snack and beverage standards.** In 2004, the district adopted health promoting nutrition standards for beverages and snacks available in vending machines, school stores and a la carte items sold in the cafeteria.

- **Breakfast.** In January 2011, CPS adopted a policy requiring schools to implement a breakfast in the classroom program. This program has been piloted since 2008 and is currently being successfully implemented in around 200 schools.
- **New School Food Standards.** Beginning this school year, the district adopted new nutritional standards for its school meal program. These standards exceed the gold nutrition standards of the USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge, increasing whole grains, fruits and vegetables. In addition, CPS adopted the Harvard School of Public Health's breakfast recommendations, which ban donuts and breakfast pastries and greatly increase the amount of protein in breakfast. For the first time the district has also adopted standards for how and where food is grown, with a preference for regionally grown fruits and vegetables and a requirement that milk contain no artificial hormones. The district's farm-to-school program is now one of the biggest in the country, with \$2.3 million of fresh and flash-frozen products purchased this school year. The district continues to seek more healthful foods for its programs including antibiotic-free chicken.
- **Recess.** CPS has been encouraging schools to reinstate recess by providing schools with access to funding to cover some of the costs associated with recess.
- **Go for the Gold.** In 2010, CPS and HSC launched Go for the Gold, a district-wide initiative to challenge and support schools to adopt the health promoting standards of the USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge. The HealthierUS School Challenge is a major element of First Lady Michelle Obama's effort to address childhood obesity, and supports programming and policies that lead to healthy school environments. The program recognizes and rewards schools for meeting high standards in school food, nutrition education, physical activity, and physical education.
- **Environmental Action Plan.** CPS adopted an environmental action plan with the goal of minimizing the district's impact on the environment and teaching students to be environmental stewards. This plan includes strategies for transportation, air, energy, waste, land, water and environmental education. The plan contributes to healthy indoor air quality for students, an especially critical issue for the many students with asthma, and recognizes the important role that schools play in ensuring that the city's environment is healthy for its residents.
- **Require that the School Improvement Plan for Advancing Academic Achievement (SIPAAA) includes a health and wellness goal.**
CPS schools are required to adopt annual school improvement plans (SIPAAA) which are developed and adopted by Local School Councils or charter school boards. SIPAAA goals are communicated to the entire school community, provide a framework for policy, program and budget decisions, and are used to evaluate the principal. In January, CPS amended the SIPAAA to require schools to include a health and wellness goal in their annual plans.

Healthy Schools Campaign Policy Recommendations

To continue building on these milestones and support health and learning for the city's students, HSC recommends that the next mayor of Chicago adopt policies that prioritize health and wellness in CPS schools:

1. **Continue to require that all new public schools be green as defined by the United States Green Building Council or another reputable standard setting organization.**

Green schools incorporate key attributes that support health and learning and reduce schools' environmental impacts. These include daylighting, high-quality acoustics that allow students to focus and hear, and healthy indoor air. An ongoing requirement that all new school facilities meet a green standard will be an important component of a healthy school agenda.

2. **Improve the school nurse-student ratio.**

School nurses play an important role in supporting student learning by promoting student and staff health and safety. School nurses provide health services and health education, and work with school staff, parents and others to create a healthy school environment that promotes health and supports staff wellness. CPS falls far below the national standard for the ratio of school nurses to students as identified by the US Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2020. Increasing the number of school nurses will support student health and learning. HSC is recommending a student to nurse ratio of one nurse for every 750 students.

3. **Provide professional development opportunities for AIOs, principals, teachers and teacher's assistants on how to promote student health and wellness.**

School personnel often lack the knowledge and skills necessary to support and promote student health and wellness. Professional development programs could go a long way towards addressing that gap. Examples of such programs include seminars for principals on how to manage a school facility that promotes a healthy environment and seminars for teachers on classroom management strategies that incorporate nutrition education, physical activity and healthy rewards. Ensuring that Area Instructional Officers (AIOs), principals, teachers, and teachers' assistants have the knowledge and skills to support healthy schools will support student wellness.

4. **Continue to support Go for the Gold, a citywide effort to support schools in meeting the criteria of the USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge, a cornerstone of the First Lady's effort to reduce childhood obesity within a generation.**

This citywide effort, which is a partnership between CPS and HSC, encourages schools to incorporate nutrition education, physical activity and other health promoting policies and programs. Go for the Gold is supported by a Civic and Business Advisory Committee as well as not-for-profit health and education organizations across the city. The next mayor can provide strong support for this initiative by: directing the CPS CEO and Board President to support this initiative; requesting regular updates on its progress; participating in events recognizing schools that successfully meet the USDA's HealthierUS School Challenge; participating in events recognizing parents and other school stakeholders who have actively

participated on their school wellness teams and made positive changes to school health; and supporting the Interdepartmental Taskforce on Childhood Obesity.

5. Continue to support the CPS Environmental Action Plan.

It is important for the long-term health of students and all the city's residents that CPS and the City of Chicago proactively work to ensure that schools are built and managed in an environmentally responsible way. Providing support to schools to reduce their carbon footprints and educating students to be environmental stewards are important strategies for ensuring a healthy environment for everyone. The implementation of the CPS Environmental Action Plan is an important part of this broader effort.

6. Extend the school day.

CPS has the shortest school day of any large school district in the country, making it difficult for students to have adequate time for breakfast and lunch, and for schools to implement daily recess in grades K-5 and meet the state's requirement for daily PE. A longer school day will ensure that there is adequate time for instruction, healthful meals, physical activity and play – elements that contribute significantly to students' readiness to learn.

For More Information

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