

# healthy learning

## News

**SUPERINTENDENT  
SUCCESS STORIES FROM THE FIELD**

**SUMMER | 2010**

*A healthy school environment is important to the well-being, development and achievement of students. Schools have the potential to influence children's food choices and daily activity levels, and present a wonderful opportunity to introduce and encourage healthy habits. The following school districts are implementing innovative programs, policies and practices that are creating healthier school environments for students and staff.*

## Follow the Leader: Superintendents' Thinking and Actions on Physical Activity

**D**ecades ago, a fat child meant a healthy child. But today, we are all too aware that overweight and obese youngsters are at greater risk of serious health problems than their healthy-weight classmates. If you were to ask superintendents to name the top three issues that keep them up at night, childhood obesity may not make that list. But if you question them on their concerns for the students they serve, health issues often garner one of those spots. In this issue of *Healthy Learning News*, we focus on three school systems that are making sustained policy and programmatic efforts

to increase physical activity through innovative, enduring and sometimes simple measures.

### **Physical Activity and School Performance**

Research indicates there is a positive relationship between physical activity and academic success. In a 2009 study, Texas children with greater scores on a physical fitness test were more likely to do well on the state's standardized tests than children scoring lower on the fitness test.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, New York City students scoring in the top 5 percent on a fitness test scored an average of 36 percentage points higher on standardized tests than students who scored in the bottom 5 percent on the fitness test.<sup>2</sup>

According to John Ratey, clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, these results are in part because exercise primes the brain for learning.<sup>3</sup>

### **Superintendents and Systemic Change**

School system leaders understand the relationships between academic success and health. They can bear witness that students perform better when they are physically active and that they think more clearly when they have consumed nutritious food.

The assertion that local school systems need to be part of the solution to childhood obesity is no longer open to question. Any

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### **what's inside:**

- ◆ **The School District of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pa.**
- ◆ **Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools, Williamsburg, Va.**
- ◆ **Fayette County Public Schools, Lexington, Ky.**

*The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States.*

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comprehensive effort to improve children's health-related behaviors must recognize the major role schools play in the lives of young people and in the development and implementation of policies and programs to effect change. After all, students spend a majority of their day in school during most of the year.

Again and again, the research demonstrates the key role played by the superintendent in creating systemic change. According to a Johns Hopkins University study on promising programs, the support and leadership of the superintendent is essential for any major school district policy or initiative to be achieved and sustained.<sup>4</sup> The Eli Lilly Foundation, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Carnegie Corporation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation – four key funders of school reform over the past 25 years – note that districts most successful in creating schools that support healthy development and high achievement were led by superintendents whose vision translated into mobilizing rhetoric and enabling action.<sup>5</sup>

## What Superintendents Say About Physical Activity

To better understand the views and needs of school system leaders throughout the country, AASA conducted a web-based survey of local superintendents and state administrator executives. AASA received 535 complete responses and an additional 400 partially completed surveys. Of the 535 respondents:

- ◆ 77 percent stated their district had a policy or planned opportunity during the school day that allows for students to participate in physical activity outside of regular physical

education classes, like recess or walking clubs.

- ◆ 83 percent indicated their district has a back-up plan to ensure students can participate in physical activity indoors when there is inclement weather.
- ◆ 65 percent have students participate in lifelong fitness activities, such as power walking, roller skating, skiing, golf, tennis, bowling, swimming, hiking, fishing and yoga.
- ◆ 62 percent include a physical activity component as part of their after-school programming.
- ◆ 57 percent indicated that less than a quarter of their students walk or bike to school. Another 11 percent indicated that none of their students walk or bike to school. The most common reasons for students not walking or biking to school is that the district is in a rural area or that safety is an issue.
- ◆ 47 percent indicated they had policies or practices in place that encourage district staff to be active and eat healthy foods.

## Policy and Program Changes

Several prominent national organizations have issued policy options and recommendations outlining the important role schools and superintendents can play in promoting physically active lifestyles. In its recent report, "Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States," the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified strategies for encouraging physical activity and limiting sedentary behavior among children and youth.<sup>6</sup> Leadership for Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, released an Action Strategies Toolkit that contains 10 strategies for increasing physical activity and healthy food access in schools and communities.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to such federal guidelines and philanthropic leadership, superintendents are being recognized for the critical role they can play and the actions they have taken to create environments that facilitate physical activity and active living.

In May 2009, Roel Gonzalez, superintendent of the Rio Grande City Consolidated School District in Rio Grande City, Texas, a primarily Latino community on the Mexican border, was recognized by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for his work in this area. Among the many policy changes in his district, all students have physical education class every day. Says Gonzalez, "Physical education teachers are just as important as reading or other academic core teachers."<sup>8</sup>

- 1) Texas Education Agency, "News." March 9, 2009. <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/press/09fitnessresults.pdf>
- 2) New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, "New York City Vital Signs." June 2009, Vol. 8, No. 1. [www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/survey/survey-2009fitnessgram.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/survey/survey-2009fitnessgram.pdf)
- 3) Viadero, Debra. "Exercise Seen as Priming Pump for Students' Academic Strides." *Education Week*, Feb. 12, 2008. [www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/02/13/23exercise\\_ep.h27.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/02/13/23exercise_ep.h27.html)
- 4) Herman, R. and Stringfield, S. 1997. *Ten Promising Programs for Educating All Students: Evidence of Impact*. Arlington, Va.: Educational Research Service.
- 5) Lipsitz, J., Mizell, M. Jackson, A. and Austin, L. 1997. "Speaking with One Voice." *Phi Delta Kappan* 78(7): 533-540.
- 6) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 58(RR07) 1-26, July 24, 2009. [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5807a1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5807a1.htm)
- 7) Leadership for Healthy Communities. *Action Strategies Toolkit*. May 2009. [www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/content/view/352/154/](http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org/content/view/352/154/)
- 8) American Association of School Administrators. "Together We Stand: A Shared Vision to Change the Course of Childhood Obesity in African-American and Latino Communities." *Healthy Learning News: Superintendent Success Stories from the Field*. Fall 2008. [www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/\\_files/HLN\\_fall08.pdf](http://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/_files/HLN_fall08.pdf) ◆



The School District of Philadelphia, the eighth-largest urban school district in the nation, stands out among most big-city school systems for its innovative approach to building a system of great schools for all students. When Arlene Ackerman became Philadelphia's superintendent in 2008, she awakened broad community engagement and set an agenda to accelerate achievement, raise expectations and equalize opportunity for all students. Within 10 months, the School District of Philadelphia had a five-year strategic plan called "Imagine 2014" that focused on five major goals: student success, quality choices, great staff, accountable adults and world-class operations. "Imagine 2014" places student success at the core of all its present and future initiatives, including providing services that safeguard health and well-being to improve academic achievement. Ackerman states, "Success for all students requires us to do whatever it takes and to pay attention to whatever they need in order to achieve ... it's all connected."

## Making Opportunities for Physical Activity a District Priority

In accordance with its wellness policy, the school district has made strides in making physical activity and overall wellness a priority. Charged with leading the district's health, wellness, safety and physical activity programs, the district's Department of Health, Safety and Physical Education in the Office of Teaching and Learning manages multiple grants, consults with faculty and staff on emergency issues and

is on the front lines to implement aspects of "Imagine 2014."

*"We set aside a quarter of a million dollars to establish intramural athletic programs for middle grade students," says Ackerman. "From elementary through high school, we have increased the number of sports programs, nurses and counselors available to students."* Providing equitable and consistent access to wellness education and related components throughout the district is fundamental to the success of all students and schools.

The Department of Health, Safety and Physical Education also coordinates the district's school health councils, which operate in approximately half of the district's 293 schools. The department's staff expects to see the number of councils increase as Ackerman makes health part of the district's core assessment.

The Central-Level Coordinated School Health Council, a diverse group of district administrators, union representatives, parents, local health organizations and community leaders, spent eight months creating the school district's wellness policy in 2006. The plan weaves health and wellness activities throughout the entire district and in each school, including a requirement that physical activity breaks be planned in every classroom. One such activity uses a program called "JAMmin' Minute," a kinesthetic learning technique that teachers conduct in their classrooms with prompts to engage in short bursts of physical activity. Appropriate professional development for

teachers emphasizes why physical activity in the classroom is important, and shows how to undertake the activity so that it informs the academic mission rather than detracts from it.

## Community Partnerships

The School District of Philadelphia is firmly committed to fostering partnerships for the benefit of education and student wellness. In addition to national organizations such as the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and Action for Healthy Kids, countless local community groups and organizations work with district personnel to build better-quality programs and provide more opportunities in the areas of health and well-being for all. "Community voices help shape who we are as a system of schools and what we are able to accomplish at the micro and macro levels," said Ackerman.

"Run for Something Better," sponsored by ING, brought members of the Philadelphia Eagles football team and the Philadelphia KiXX indoor soccer team to schools to introduce youth to the benefits of running and physical fitness. Independence Blue Cross, the district's insurer, recently provided a grant to monitor and assess student fitness and overall health. The program will help physical education teachers create customized fitness assessments and activities through an easy-to-use hand-held computer. The district administration plans to use the information to determine the need for more targeted interventions, provide them where they are most needed, and track the



relationship between improved health and academic achievement.

In October 2008, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America held a field hearing in Philadelphia, featuring Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter and more than a dozen experts from around the country. The hearing focused on the physical and social conditions in which people live, learn, work and play – including homes, schools and neighborhoods – and their direct influence on health-related behaviors and health status. "One of my long-held beliefs is that it takes the entire community to ensure the success of its public schools," said Ackerman.

With the superintendent's clear focus, a districtwide plan that includes physical activity and nutrition and child wellness, the School District of Philadelphia is making changes that are likely to



result in lasting effects. Ackerman reminds superintendents to focus on what matters most: the children. *"If our commitment is genuine and our hearts are in the right place, then one simple question will guide the way: Are we acting in the best interests of the children? The work is not about us, our reputations, or budget limitations; it's all about the children. If we have the will to give them whatever they need, we will find a way."*

#### See Also:

Imagine 2014: <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/s/strategic-planning> ♦

# Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools, Williamsburg, Va.

Superintendent: Gary Mathews • Total Number of Schools: 14

Total Number of Students: 10,500 • Free/Reduced Lunch Rate: 25%

Gary Mathews, superintendent of the Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools in Williamsburg, Va., came to the district in 2005 with a vision of lifelong learning, independent thinking and responsible citizenship. That same year, the district received a \$75,000 planning grant from the Williamsburg Community Health Foundation to conduct a comprehensive study of their health and wellness programs using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's School Health Index. The planning grant was followed by a three-year, \$3.6 million commitment from the foundation to help the district increase physical activity and healthy food choices. Called the School Health Initiative Project, this comprehensive effort positioned the superintendent and staff to literally transform the school district environment to promote healthy living and move them toward Mathews' vision.

#### Movement in the Classroom

The School Health Initiative Project enabled the district to hire a program coordinator, a registered dietician, physical education resource teachers, a community outreach coordinator and a wellness integration specialist who works with classroom teachers on integrating movement into classroom activities, or kinesthetic learning.

Kinesthetic learning has been so popular that many teachers design lessons themselves without relying solely on the wellness integration specialist's guidance. They submit these lesson plans to the specialist so the plans may be shared with all teachers.

Administrators and teachers alike embrace the concept of kinesthetic

learning because of its impact on classroom performance and on state test scores. The first school in the district to implement kinesthetic learning saw its state test scores improve.

While the superintendent does not credit kinesthetic learning alone to this increase, he does believe it played an important part. *"In the past, schools may have shied away from policies or programs related to physical activity in part because we simply have not known as much regarding the impact of childhood obesity on the education process. Current research suggests that schools must be concerned because it impacts learning,"* said Mathews. Now when administrators visit classrooms, it is an expectation that excellent teaching involves active engagement.

#### Physical Activity: More Than a Requirement

The School Health Initiative Project allows the district to provide physical activities before and after school in several locations throughout the district.

- ♦ **Fitness Club** – Offered in all eight of the elementary schools, this program allows the students to come right in off the bus in the mornings and work with the PE teacher on selected activities.
- ♦ **Challenge Club** – Held after school in all of the elementary and middle schools, this program provides students with an opportunity to choose from physical activities including dance, soccer, karate and ballroom dancing. These activities are taught by college students and community members.
- ♦ **Powerblock** – Offered in one elementary school that restruc-

tured the school week in order to give students an extra 45 minutes of recess one day each week.

- ♦ **Special physical activity event** – Held throughout the district and include activities such as wellness fairs, fitness nights (climbing wall, jump ropes), and mixers/dances with parents and students in the elementary schools. *"No community is better than its public schools,"* Mathews believes, which is one reason why he offers so many opportunities for physical activity within his schools and throughout the community.

#### Setting the Tone

Mathews sees a key role of superintendents as setting the tone for the full support of activities that change the school environment to improve child health. *"Superintendents need to collaborate and coordinate with the proper entities in their communities that specialize in health and wellness and learning. Go to a physical education classroom and solicit ideas on what can be done about obesity in terms of education and activity within schools."* The superintendent's support of staff empowers them to take a role to improve the health of students. The superintendent leads the way with the expectation of full participation coupled with several opportunities for students, teachers and parents in Williamsburg to learn, grow and be healthy.

#### See Also:

School Health Index – A school-based tool from the CDC to assess strengths and weaknesses related to health and wellness and to develop an action plan for improving the promotion and management of health and safety. [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/SHI/brochure.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/SHI/brochure.htm) ♦

# Fayette County Public Schools, Lexington, Ky.

Superintendent: **Stu Silberman** • Total Number of Schools: **56**  
• Total Number of Students: **36,870** • Free/Reduced Lunch Rate: **42.4%**

**S**tu Silberman, the 2009 Kentucky State Superintendent of the Year, has led the Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington since 2004. Soon after his arrival, Silberman issued the “2020 Vision” project, a clarion call to the community to help “change the face of education in Fayette County.” More than 1,300 people responded to this school improvement challenge. Twenty-one work groups, including one on physical health and well-being, were formed with the ultimate goal of ensuring that every child receives a world-class education.

## A Community Envisioning Success

“2020 Vision” hosted public engagement forums in order to have conversations with the superintendent, teachers, students, the school board, parents and the community at large. After six months of meetings and with the feedback received through these forums, the work group on physical health and well-being submitted eight recommendations to the school board, which resolved to implement them. One such recommendation that was imple-

mented quickly was the creation of a staff position called a practical living specialist. The position would provide guidance to school-level administrators on physical education and health curriculum, work with the district’s grant writer on specific projects and assist classroom teachers in incorporating physical education and health into their lesson plans.

A state-mandated Coordinated School Health Council continues the work of the work group on physical health and well-being in a somewhat different capacity. The council sets annual wellness goals and oversees the creation of a wellness report card for the district, which reports on the implementation of the school year’s wellness goal and activities.

Fayette County Public Schools also receive support from the University of Kentucky to integrate wellness activities into the district’s programs. One pilot program, called the Physical Activity and Wellness Schools, seeks to integrate kinesthetic learning into lesson plans in several schools. The practical

living specialist is instrumental as a trainer and liaison to this pilot. The university is studying the impact of these physical activity breaks on academic achievement. Teachers who participate in the program like it and cite anecdotal improvements in student behavior.

Another partnership with the University of Kentucky is an obesity prevention program in a high-poverty elementary school. It is successful in engaging students and their parents on health-related activities and changing health behaviors inside and out of the classroom. The school district sees these university partnerships as important because of their ability to leverage resources for physical activity during the school day.

The district promotes team and individual sports and exercise classes to students and their families offered by the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government. In addition, the district helps to promote Second Sunday, which makes the main street in Lexington a pedestrian zone with physical activity stations. The PTA of the school that was able to bring out the greatest number of participants wins a prize. The collaboration between the school district and local government on Second Sunday strives to get more people out and active in the community.

## Physical Activity as an Expectation

The recommendations of “2020 Vision,” combined with the district’s wellness policy, provide guidance on opportunities for physical activity. The district offers numerous options for students to participate in physical activity throughout the day. For

example, all students K-8 engage in 30-40 minutes of physical activity each school day, and the district employs only certified physical education teachers. Some schools also have strong intramural programs and pay for an intramural coordinator to work both before and after school. More than 1,000 middle and high school students participate in tennis, basketball, badminton and other intramural sports.

## State Requirements and Standards

Fayette County Public Schools voluntarily conducts the Practical Skills test for physical education in addition to state-mandated components for the the Kentucky Instructional Results and Information System, which compiles a school score from assessment results used to determine sanctions and rewards for administrators and teachers. The district would like to make health and physical education a part of the district’s accountability score.

*“We believe that healthy kids learn at much higher levels and our accountability scores should continue to rise as kids become more and more fit,”* said Silberman. *“Whether or not health and physical education end up being part of the state’s accountability system, we have a moral responsibility to do our part in helping kids in this area.”*

## Modeling Leadership

Feedback on the district’s engagement and focus on physical activity has been largely positive, due, in part, to Silberman’s leadership. *“We are lucky to have a superintendent who believes in physical activity for kids,”* tendered one district **Continued on back**





To request additional copies of this issue of Healthy Learning News, go to [www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=212](http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=212). You can also access previous issues of Healthy Learning News and other resources to address childhood obesity on that page.

## Resources

### Research Briefs

- ◆ *Active Education: Physical Education, Physical Activity and Academic Performance Research Brief* (Summer 2009) – summarizes the relationship between physical activity and academic performance. [www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Active\\_Ed\\_Summer2009.pdf](http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Ed_Summer2009.pdf)
- ◆ *Walking and Biking to School, Physical Activity and Health Outcomes Research Brief* (May 2009) – summarizes active transport to school, physical activity levels and health outcomes. [www.activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR\\_Brief\\_ActiveTransport.pdf](http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveTransport.pdf)

### Books

- ◆ Medina, John. *Brain Rules*, Pear Press, 2008.
- ◆ Ratey, John. *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. Little, Brown and Co., 2008.

### Programs

- ◆ **Spark PE** disseminates evidence-based physical activity and nutrition programs and provides curriculum, staff development and follow-up support. [www.sparkpe.org](http://www.sparkpe.org)
- ◆ The **JAM School Program** delivers a weekly one-minute exercise routine and a monthly health newsletter. [www.jamschoolprogram.com](http://www.jamschoolprogram.com)
- ◆ **ING Run for Something Better** helps fund running and fitness education programs in schools to show kids how exercise can help achieve good health. [www.ing-usa.com/us/aboutING/corporatesponsorships/rfsb/index.htm](http://www.ing-usa.com/us/aboutING/corporatesponsorships/rfsb/index.htm) ◆

## Fayette County

### Continued from inside

employee. Said another, “*Stu is a role model for fitness – he is a bicyclist and seen around town. We are so fortunate to have him as our superintendent.*” Through his leadership in physical activity, Silberman secured a bicycle safety education grant from the Kentucky Bicycle and Bikeway Commission. All elementary-school physical education teachers will be trained in bicycle safety to teach children the fundamentals of safe biking. “*It’s important that adults model good behavior,*” Silberman said. “*There is a tremendous value in children receiving physical activity.*”

### See Also:

“2020 Vision” Project: [www.fcps.net/partners/2020-vision](http://www.fcps.net/partners/2020-vision) ◆