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Bridging the Cultural Divide to Create Healthier Kids

Field study shows ways to improve school health initiatives among diverse communities

Chicago, IL (August 25, 2009) – Childhood obesity and undernourishment affect almost a third of American children from all walks of life; this incidence is even higher among African American, Latino and Native American children. Schools throughout America are tackling this growing crisis in a variety of ways. Several successful initiatives and learnings that can be applied to schools and communities are presented in a new field report, *Lessons for Engaging Diverse Communities to Create Healthy Schools and Kids*. The report was published by Action for Healthy Kids, a national non-profit organization that promotes better nutrition and more physical activity in schools.

“To improve the health of all our children, it is important to realize there is not just one approach,” says Roel Gonzalez, superintendent of the Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District and a board member of Action for Healthy Kids. “What works for a suburban school in the northeast might not work for an urban school in Texas or a Native American school in the southwest. We’ve examined school initiatives in diverse settings to provide recommendations for a variety of school cultures and situations.”

Highlights of lessons learned and recommendations include:

1. Understand and be sensitive to cultural differences, beliefs, and the daily challenges in many minority communities.

For many, food is an important part of their culture. In fact, some ethnic diets are healthier than the typical American diet. It’s important to not risk insulting a minority community by referring to a cultural tradition or practice as “negative,” “unhealthy” or “problematic.” For example, some Latin cultures see a chubby child as a healthy child. One educator found success working with Latino parents by talking about a shared goal of healthy children, and encouraging families to take walks and do other activities together rather than focus on losing weight.

One way to maneuver through the potential pitfalls of cultural differences is with the support of a “cultural broker.” This is an “insider” who can help “outsiders” build trust and relationships in cross-cultural situations because she/he was raised in a culture, has lived the challenges, speaks the language, knows the traditions, and to whom parents and community members can relate.

2. Improve access – to healthy, nutritious foods and safe places to play.

In San Juan County, Utah, much of which lies within the sovereign Navajo reservation, there is very limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables and many families are economically

depressed, not unlike many urban areas. Schools in San Juan County focused on meeting these needs by offering salad bars and hiring nutrition educators to teach children the importance and appeal of healthy foods.

3. Be considerate and address language barriers.

The San Juan County educators changed their teaching style to meet the needs of the Navajo children, who respond better to visual, tactile instruction and sometimes don't speak fluent English. In diverse neighborhoods in New York and New Jersey, poor communication, or inaccurate or culturally inappropriate translations can create more problems than it solves. If possible, involve a community member as part of the project team, particularly when there are race or language barriers.

4. It's worth the effort to engage parents.

Parents are a critical and willing force to improving children's health, the report found. However, schools must work hard to educate and engage them. Being involved with school is a foreign concept to many Mexican parents. In Mexico, they aren't welcome at school and so don't even think about getting involved. In other cases, fear of straying too far from their neighborhood keeps them at home.

"The key is to understand your audience," says B.J. Carter, co-chair of the New York Action for Healthy Kids state team, and national director of Healthy Children/Healthy Futures. In the field report, Carter points out one Brooklyn community that has Southeast Asian immigrants, Latinos, and Hasidic Jews living in close proximity. "You can't make assumptions about the community you serve, because it is never just one thing."

Lessons for Engaging Diverse Communities to Create Healthy Schools and Kids provides direct recommendations and additional resources for those working to improve children's health either in the community or at school. It is available at http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org/special_exclusive.php under Field Reports.

About Action for Healthy Kids

Action for Healthy Kids[®] is a national non-profit organization that addresses the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on improving nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in schools. This grassroots public-private partnership of 65 organizations and government agencies supports the efforts of Teams comprised of about 10,000 volunteers in all states and the District of Columbia. To learn more, visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

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