



Tapping into the Power: Engaging Parents in the Fight Against Childhood Obesity

Action for Healthy Kids has always operated according to the principle that impacting schools' approaches to nutrition and physical activity requires many participants – perhaps none more important than parents. The Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team not only validated our cornerstone tenet that parents can successfully be enlisted in the fight, but showed how quantitative tools can provide crucial measurement of the impact of efforts to educate and inform them – offering a valuable blueprint of the possibilities, and indeed the limits, of parent involvement. Meanwhile, the Montana Action for Healthy Kids Team project is an eloquent confirmation of how Action for Healthy's belief in "thinking globally and acting locally" can be applied to a parent-led project. The originality and diversity with which mini-grants were utilized in towns across the Big Sky state are a testament to Action for Healthy Kids' unflagging belief in the ultimate power – and often overlooked willingness – of parents to help.

THE PARENT OUTREACH INITIATIVE: LESSONS LEARNED

- Work with, and leverage, existing resources.
- Partner with existing organizations to facilitate the project.
- Handpick schools if necessary to expedite and streamline a project.
- Be certain not to duplicate, or compete with, concurrent efforts by other, similar organizations.

If there were any doubt of the existence of a "knowledge gap" on the part of parents when it comes to school nutrition and physical activity – and of the urgent need to reach out and engage parents in the fight against childhood obesity – consider the following.

Nearly two-thirds of parents support restricting access to high-calorie, low-nutrient snack foods in schools, and half of parents feel their child's school is doing an "excellent" to "good" job in this area, according to a 2005 Action for Healthy Kids national public opinion survey.

However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that between 60% and 95% of schools allow students to purchase snack foods or beverages from vending machines or at the school store, canteen, or snack bar. At these schools, less nutritious foods and beverages made up the majority of those sales.

Another illustration of a "disconnect" between parents' priorities and perceptions and what actually happens at school occurs in the area of physical activity. Seventy-seven percent of parents support requiring daily physical education for all children, and 62% rate their child's school as "excellent" or "good" on "making daily physical education available for all students." However, in reality only 5.8 to 8.0% of schools nationally (depending on grade level) provide students with daily physical education.

Finally, despite parents' strong support for healthy options at school, the

WHY PARENTS?

Schools have been the immediate targets of policy decisions intended to counter the effects of childhood obesity. Much of the focus has been on improving the nutritional quality of school meals, a la carte choices, vending options, and other foods and beverages available at school. Other efforts have attempted to counteract the activity debt children face. These center on increasing time for recess, structured physical education instruction, and walking accessibility in school communities.

Students themselves are also targeted with age-appropriate messages supporting proper nutrition and daily activity. This education occurs through classroom venues as well as by placing visible messages throughout the schools in the form of colorful posters and signs.

However, the Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team believed that engaging and supporting parents and other caregivers was a crucial link to success in reaching the overall goals. While school programs, instructional materials, and supportive school environments are necessary to introduce concepts and skills, time spent in a school setting is only part of a child's life. Engaging the parents and caregivers provides support and expands the venues for practice and application beyond the school setting. This component of child health may be the most vital, due to its modeling and reinforcing effect. Moreover, it carries an immediacy of impact that only parental involvement can provide.

vast majority of parents (83%) are unaware of the Local Wellness Policy mandate in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. The legislation requires that all school districts participating in the National School Meals Program implement Local Wellness Policies before the 2006 school year. The Act specifies that parents, among other key school stakeholders, be involved from the beginning in designing these district policies.

Getting Parents Involved: It's Time

To Pennsylvania State University's Elaine McDonnell, a Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team member, the importance of parents' involvement in the battle against childhood overweight rests in the fact that parents are role models, plain and simple.

"We see it over and over again," she says. "Kids imitate parents – it's a fact. When parents drink low-fat milk and eat broccoli, so do their children. On one level, it really is that simple. So why wouldn't we try to make parents part of the equation?"

Katie Bark, a Montana State University nutritionist and member of her state's Action for Healthy Kids Team, is even more direct.

"Parents have power," she points out. "They carry weight. With kids, parents are the voice of authority and permission. With administrators and school boards, they're the voice of the taxpayer. Parents have a very big say when they want to. It only makes sense for us to try to engage them in our efforts."

Whatever the perceived reason, members of Action for Healthy Kids Teams across America are taking positive steps to engage parents in the effort to lengthen the strides already made in the fight against childhood obesity.

In working to improve school nutrition and the nature of school-based physical activity, Action for Healthy Kids Teams have developed, brainstormed, and implemented a variety of strategies to excite and involve key constituencies – including parents as one of the most crucial stakeholders of all.

Pennsylvania: Making Parents Participants

The Pennsylvania Action For Healthy Kids Team's recent "Parent Outreach Initiative" is an example not only of working to engage parents to improve the health and wellness of Pennsylvania's students, but of constructing a device for measurement and assessment of parent involvement, both pre- and post-initiative.

The project involved 15 schools throughout the state. Ten of the schools chosen were already involved in the local branch of the American Cancer Society's Pennsylvania School Health Leadership Institute (SHLI), and the remaining five were affiliated with the state's Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) chapter.

The basis of the project was the distribution and use of a nutrition information toolkit, entitled "*Preventing Childhood Overweight and Obesity: Parents Can Make a Difference.*" Produced by Project PA, a collaboration of the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Penn State University,

LEVERAGING RESOURCES

A lynchpin of the Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team's initiative was its decision to use an existing educational kit, *"Preventing Childhood Overweight and Obesity: Parents Can Make a Difference,"* produced by Project PA with funding from a USDA Team Nutrition grant. The kit included:

- Written educational materials, including fact-sheets on childhood obesity.
- The USDA's *"10 Tips for Parents,"* to help parents understand how best to transfer health messages to the home environment.
- The CDC's parent brochure, *"Healthy Kids, Healthy Families,"* designed to have maximum impact as a call-to-action for parents.
- A professionally produced video to inform and motivate parents to action.
- Supplementary materials with concrete action plan initiatives in targeted areas. These provided parents with examples of tools and strategies necessary for maximal impact.

the kit contained an assortment of educational items, both in print and video, designed to teach parents of elementary, middle school, and high school students about nutrition and childhood obesity. More to the point, the kit aimed specifically to promote parents' involvement in school activities related to these topics – to encourage parents to take part in things such as school health councils, and generally to become informed, pro-active participants in their local schools' commitment to nutrition, physical activity, and physical education.

Says Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team Co-chair Diana Fox, "Our bottom line in this initiative was to help parents better understand the role they can, and should, play in promoting behavior change in their children. So ultimately, our message to parents, in what we described as a Targeted Awareness Campaign, was one not just of encouragement, but of empowerment."

More Than Outreach. Measurement

The Team awarded mini-grants to 15 Pennsylvania school districts to assist each district in implementing its own original strategies for working with parents. And in order to assess the effort's effectiveness, participating schools were asked to distribute a survey to parents at the beginning, and the end, of the program. These baseline and follow-up surveys provided information about parents' knowledge and behaviors around the subjects of nutrition and physical activity; about factors influencing childhood obesity; and about their knowledge of and interest in school programs that focus on healthy eating, physical activity, or physical education. The survey also inquired about parents' familiarity with the rules and regulations schools must follow regarding the various types of foods offered at school.

A total of 453 parents from all the participating schools completed the baseline survey, and over two-thirds, 294, returned the follow-up, or post-initiative survey. At some of the schools the surveys were administered by staff members, while at other schools students were more actively involved.

A detailed statistical report and summary of the pre- and post-initiative surveys, produced by an independent research organization, is available as a downloadable PDF on the Action for Healthy Kids website (www.ActionForHealthyKids.org). But in summary, survey results indicated that the presentation of educational materials to Pennsylvania parents via school teams:

**WHEN IT WORKS:
VALIDATION FROM A PARENT**

Ginny Spaide is a Nazareth, Pennsylvania parent who was on the receiving end of one of the nutrition and physical activity "grab-bags" distributed in elementary classrooms as a result of the Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team initiative. A mom of a child who arrived home with a gift-sack of informational goodies, she shared her thoughts on the initiative.

“ I thought it was terrific. The materials immediately started a discussion in our house that we wouldn't normally have had – about things like calories and fat content of certain foods. In our house we actually ended up switching from white rice to brown rice, and from regular pasta to whole wheat pasta, as a result of some of the materials we read together. The "grab-bag" materials also helped me drive home the message of choice and decision-making with my kids – the idea that, when it comes to good nutrition and physical activity, the choices are theirs to make, not someone else's. ”

PENNSYLVANIA: THE INITIATIVE STEP-BY-STEP

The Pennsylvania Action for Healthy Kids Team's "Parent Outreach Initiative" can be easily replicated by others. Here's the process they followed:

STEP 1: Identified the project's centerpiece. Nutrition information toolkit, produced by Project PA.

STEP 2: Solidified the project's goal. To distribute and encourage use of the toolkit by parents, with the goal of their becoming informed, proactive participants in their schools' commitment to nutrition, physical activity, and physical education.

STEP 3: Selected participating school districts. Worked with existing "relationship schools" already connected to Pennsylvania's School Health Leadership Institute (SHLI) and with the state's Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) chapter.

STEP 4: Distributed mini-grants. A total of 15 schools awarded mini-grants.

STEP 5: Happily volunteered hand-holding. Action for Healthy Kids Team members available to districts in developing creative approaches to parent education.

STEP 6: Measurement carefully planned in advance. Surveys distributed at beginning and end of the program to provide gauge of parents' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors before and after.

STEP 7: Independent research completed. Pre- and post-initiative surveys overseen and tabulated by an impartial research organization.

STEP 8: Survey results reviewed, reported, circulated. Results made available to all interested parties via Action for Healthy Kids website.

- improved parents' knowledge about the effects of nutrition and physical activity on learning;
- improved knowledge about the importance of role modeling;
- and improved both perceived and actual knowledge about the rules that schools must follow related to nutrition and physical education.

The surveys demonstrated that participating parents gained knowledge about healthy eating, physical activity, and the positive influence of parents who model these behaviors. The results also indicated an increase in parent involvement in the participating schools.

Significantly, however, parents who had not previously been involved in school activities related to physical activity and nutrition were no more likely to become involved, or want to become involved, after the educational outreach – suggesting that more sustained efforts may be necessary to change parental behavior among this group.

Goals, Targets, and Readability

Because of its clearly defined goals, its seamless administration, its pinpoint targeting of a key audience, and its readable and actionable results, Pennsylvania's "Parent Outreach Initiative" is a model Action for Healthy Kids Team project. Team Co-chair Diana Fox makes several notable points regarding the effort's success:

"When we found out that, on a national level, Action for Healthy Kids was encouraging Teams like ours to apply for grants to execute initiatives, it was important for us to submit a proposal that was realistic and do-able. We wanted a project that would have a timeline – a beginning and an end."

"Also, we were cognizant of the fact that another organization in Pennsylvania was already working on targeting schools, so, rather than compete with or duplicate their efforts, we decided to focus strictly on parents. Plus, the stars really aligned for us, so to speak, in that Project PA had just completed their parent-involvement kit – it was literally just finished and ready to go."

What about the selection of schools? Diana Fox claims that was an easy decision.

"The choice to work with schools in the state that were already associated with the American Cancer Society's School Health Leadership Institute (SHLI), a staff-driven initiative and with Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), a student-driven initiative, was based on my firm belief that you should always use the infrastructure you've got in place. These schools were already, in some ways, a 'captive audience,' and it seemed silly to cast a whole new net when we already had relationships at these schools – relationships that we could leverage. In a way, it was the same as our decision to use Project PA's already-produced parent-education kit. My philosophy is that, whether it's people or schools or educational tools, you work with the resources you've got, and don't get caught up in creating new ones. That's where the time gets wasted."

The Importance of Hand-holding

Fox insists that you can't just design an initiative, set it in motion, and then

MONTANA: THE INITIATIVE STEP-BY-STEP

Any state with a diversity of school districts could execute an “Idea Guide” project just like the Montana Action for Healthy Kids Team. Here’s how the Team went about it.

STEP 1: Hit upon the concept. The notion of a custom-published “Idea Guide” for parents brainstormed at Montana Action for Healthy Kids’ November 2003 Team meeting.

STEP 2: Strategized an approach. Parent groups targeted and encouraged to apply for mini-grants to implement original, small-scale action plans to improve nutrition or physical activity at their school.

STEP 3: Cast a wide net. The Team encouraged a broad variety of parent-originated ideas by involving far-flung school districts, statewide.

STEP 4: Monitored and collected the ideas. Montana Action for Healthy Kids Team members compiled project descriptions and results.

STEP 5: Edited the collection. Ten diverse ideas written up and custom-published in color-booklet form.

STEP 6: Spread the word. Booklets distributed through parents’ organizations and Action for Healthy Kids events, to serve as blueprints for others’ projects.

“What our project demonstrates is what parents and parent-organizations can do if you give them a little incentive. The money was minuscule – but it was enough to encourage some original thinking and action, and that’s what really matters. In the end, that’s what Action for Healthy Kids Teams can do best – provide a little financial support that’s symbolic of a LOT of encouragement and support.”

Katie Bark
Co-chair, Montana Action
for Healthy Kids Team

sit back. Personal contact and close management are essential – from the very beginning.

“When we received applications from schools that were encouraged to apply,” Fox recalls, “we would phone them individually to review their applications, tweak the applications as necessary, and even coach the applicants if needed. Other schools, of course, we handpicked, because we knew they were strongest in terms of the likelihood of enthusiastic participation. Again, we didn’t want to fool around and waste time.”

“Also, we deliberately included a line-item in our budget for training of the teams at the various schools who were working with the parent-education kit, and also with the surveys. It was important to us that they all knew what they were doing, and that they were all doing the same thing. That took training.”

Pennsylvania Team members report that they were constantly impressed with the creativity of participating schools; Team Liaison Sharon Piano describes a particularly good example of executional ingenuity.

“At one of our schools,” Piano says, “the students administering the project put together “grab-bags” for the elementary classrooms. Each student got his or her own little gift sack to take home, which included age-appropriate children’s books on physical activity and nutrition, packages of low-fat microwave popcorn, and, of course, reading matter for parents. The point was to make educating the parents about child nutrition and physical activity an interactive event between child and parent. The kids perceived the “grab-bag” items as fun gifts; the information provided was of extremely high quality; and the material was well-received by parents.”

Piano, who traveled the state promoting and presenting the Pennsylvania “Parent Outreach Initiative’s” final report, highlighting its findings to a range of audiences, sums up her take on the importance of the effort.

“No one disputes,” she maintains, “that what kids learn about nutrition and physical activity at school is important. But unless you make the connection between school and home, you’re not going to have the greatest possible educational impact. And the key to that is parents – making sure that (a) parents have an understanding of what kids are learning and hearing at school, and (b) that the parents grasp the importance of their backing it up at home.”

“To me,” Piano continues, “the most fascinating finding in our study was that, even though parents who were somewhat interested in what was going on nutritionally and in terms of physical activity at school became more interested once their knowledge was enhanced, those parents who were apathetic in the beginning remained apathetic in the wake of even more information. Does this mean there are some parent hurdles we simply can’t surmount? Possibly. Or possibly it means that our future efforts simply need to focus more precisely on those parents.”

Montana: Getting Beyond the Bake Sale

Anybody who’s worked with a parent group of any kind knows that parents’ school fundraising and even social activities frequently center around candy sales and bake sales – well-meaning efforts that are unfortunately, in many

ways, antithetical to the goals of healthier, more active kids.

The Montana Action for Healthy Kids Team's "Taking Action for Healthy Kids!" project was intended to address this, and to be a way of encouraging parent organizations to make nutrition and physical activity a local school focus. As part of the initiative, the Team awarded 16 mini-grants to Montana parent organizations to help them take positive, sustainable action steps to improve access to healthful foods, physical activity, or health education for their students. The grants were administered by the Montana Action for Healthy Kids Team in cooperation with Eat Right Montana, a non-profit coalition with a long-standing commitment to helping Montanans improve their health through nutrition and fitness.

The result was not only a broad range of innovative, interesting, original ideas – ideas which emanated directly from parents themselves – but the eventual publication and distribution of a full-color reference booklet, *Montana Parents and Teachers 'Taking Action for Healthy Kids!' Idea Guide*, downloadable in PDF format on the Action for Healthy Kids website (www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).

In the self-published booklet, the 16 local Montana projects which resulted from the mini-grants were collected and described – to serve not only as a record of the various parents' organizations' accomplishments, but as a blueprint for other parents' organizations, both in Montana and across the country.

Parents: A Neglected Constituency?

The project originated at Montana's November 2003 Team meeting, at

ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS SURVEY ILLUMINATES PARENTS' VIEWS ON SCHOOL WELLNESS

The first step in engaging parents is to make them aware of the gap between their expectations and the reality that is taking place in their children's schools. In September 2005, national Action for Healthy Kids released a report on public opinion research that was designed to understand parents' beliefs and expectations with respect to wellness practices in their children's schools. The survey uncovered a significant gap between parental expectations and reality. For example:

- Parents think that schools are providing nutrition education to all students and they would like such education to be part of the core curriculum two days each week. In reality, the typical curriculum devotes only five hours a year to nutrition education, and such education is provided in some (not all) grades.
- Seventy percent of parents want less exposure to high-calorie, low-nutrient foods at school, and half of parents think that schools are doing a good job in this area. In reality, the vast majority of schools allow students to purchase such foods during the school day.
- Parents believe that lunch should be 36 minutes long, but the typical child has only 23 minutes to eat once seated at the lunch table. One in five schools gives students less than 20 minutes to eat.
- More than three-quarters (77%) of parents want daily physical education that lasts 48 minutes, and the majority think their child's school is doing a good job in this area. In reality, only six to eight percent of schools provide daily physical education.

Parents have clear views on what they think should be done in their children's schools with respect to nutrition and physical activity. For example, the survey found that parents believe that the following are important and should be required as a way to encourage good nutrition practices: daily breakfast; daily promotion of healthy food choices in school meals; applying nutrient standards to all foods sold on the school campus; providing nutrition education in all grades; limiting high-calorie, low-nutrient food offerings; and providing information on nutrition to parents.

With respect to physical activity, parents believe that the following are important and should be required: daily physical education and recess, along with a variety of other opportunities for children to be active during the day; after-school programs that promote healthy snacks and physical activity; and education and promotion of the opportunities available for physical education.

Source: *An Action for Healthy Kids Report: Parents' Views on School Wellness Practices*, national public opinion research jointly conducted by Action for Healthy Kids, Pursuant, Inc. and Knowledge Networks, September 2005. The full report is available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

PARENTS AS PARTNERS IN CHANGE: TIPS FROM A PARENT ADVOCATE

Parent Carey Dabney is a school wellness advocate in Austin, Texas. Speaking at the Action for Healthy Kids 2005 Healthy Schools Summit, she shared the following tips for being an effective parent change-agent.

Join an organization. Instead of being just one, you become many and you have automatic credibility. Find the Action for Healthy Kids Team in your state, find a PTA, find the American Cancer Society, or any of these organizations.

Know your subject matter. When you go in to talk to the superintendent or the school board, remember that this isn't necessarily on their plate, and they've got so much they're doing. You need to do the work for them, and present it in a fashion that is easy for them to take in.

Tell everyone you meet what you're doing. You never know who can help you. Don't spend time with people who don't get it – there are a lot of people out there who do get it and your job is to find them.

Sometimes you have to make people mad to get their attention. This is really hard for parents. What you have to realize is that once you make people mad, you have their attention and you can educate them. And even if you can't convert them, oftentimes you can neutralize them so at least they don't undermine what you're trying to achieve.

This isn't about you. Although it feels like it is every single day that you go out there, it's really about the kids.

And remember: The world is run by people who show up, people just like you and me. If you just keep on showing up, we will get to the goal of healthy kids.

which it became apparent that while school administrators, educators, and school nutrition staff were being supported in making changes related to increasing healthy food choices in schools, parents clearly needed to be more aware of, and involved in, school nutrition and physical activity issues.

The Montana Action for Healthy Kids Team decided then that its mini-grants would focus on funding school parent organizations to address two major areas: (a) foods offered through sports concessions, fundraisers, classroom parties, vending machines, school meal programs, classroom student rewards, and snacks parents send to school, and (b) schools' ability to enhance physical activity opportunities or health education for students.

Specifically, parent groups were encouraged to apply for one of four categories of funding levels, \$300, \$500, \$750 or \$1,000; and to implement an original, small-scale plan to "take action" in some innovative way to improve the nutrition or physical activity environment at their schools.

Importantly, by funneling these funds through parent organizations, three benefits were envisioned by the Team as resulting at the local level: parental involvement in the healthy school environment efforts throughout Montana schools would be increased; school administrators and staff would be further supported by this grassroots approach; and students would be given increased opportunities to choose healthy foods and be physically active at school. There was an indirect benefit, too – as parents' knowledge and understanding of nutrition and physical activity were enhanced, healthy lifestyle changes would be more likely to occur.

Unique Ideas Emerge

Particularly noteworthy about the Montana effort is the variety and originality of local projects that resulted from the mini-grants. In the town of Lame Deer, for example, a "Family Night" project centered around a new parent/student table-tennis league, intended to keep kids active in cold months – simple but effective. In rural Fortine, an elementary-level soccer league was formed, with funds paying for equipment and coaching three evenings a week (parents volunteered). In the city of Havre, "Food, Fun, and Fitness" educated 800 K-5 students via color fact sheets on healthful snacks, and healthful classroom parties. In remote Evergreen, the "Evergreen Fitness Program" provided free summertime fitness training and fun to 51 students at Evergreen Junior High; gym equipment purchased with a federal grant was suddenly able to be put to use throughout the summer, keeping otherwise sedentary kids in motion year round.

Montana Team Chairperson Katie Bark points out one local project she's particularly proud of.

"We have a large Native American population in Montana, with schools on reservations representing a fairly large constituency. As a result of one of our mini-grants, the De La Salle Blackfeet Middle School in Browning created the "Be Good to Your Body" project, which provided age-appropriate and economically and culturally sensitive health and physical education to middle-school students who are members of Montana's Blackfeet tribe. Statistically, these kids are at unusually high risk for Type 2 diabetes. So I'm pleased with that inroad."

A Custom-Publishing Effort

Montana Action for Healthy Kids produced an idea guide to document the initiative. “We printed as many of the booklets as we could, budget permitting,” says Katie Bark. “All participants got one, all attendees of the 2005 National Healthy Schools Summit got one, and members of local school boards and Montana PTAs received them, too. But they were expensive – for us, anyway. In retrospect, we probably could have printed and distributed more of them if we’d designed them in black-and-white rather than color, but we really wanted them to look nice.”

“To me, though,” Katie summarizes, “what our project demonstrates is what parents and parent organizations can do if you give them a little incentive. The money was minuscule, in retrospect, but it was enough to encourage them to some original thinking and action, and that’s what really matters. In the end, that’s what Action for Healthy Kids Teams can do best – provide a little financial support that’s symbolic of a LOT of encouragement and support.”

Encouraging Parents to Encourage Kids

Dee Maclean is a Hamilton, Montana parent who was closely involved in one of the projects featured in the *Montana Parents and Teachers ‘Taking Action for Health Kids!’ Idea Guide*. Hamilton is located 50 miles south of Missoula, and their school district’s project was encouraging children to participate in the annual Seattle Marathon – from a distance. Students committed to walk, jog, or run a total of at least 25 miles by a set date. Participating kids logged their miles on a chart, and, in salute to the actual marathon, they raced the last mile together on the final day of the project. The district’s mini-grant from Action for Healthy Kids covered prize goodies such as Seattle Marathon T-shirts and books given out as awards for completing the “race.”

“Parents were critical in every respect, in this project,” Dee Maclean says, “as parents are in all aspects of their children’s lives. Or should be.”

“The way I see it,” she says, “a mom or dad isn’t just an energizer and a motivator; he or she is a child’s first and best teacher. I’m constantly amazed at how many parents don’t realize that a mom or dad is a vital catalyst, a direction provider, a helper, and the first person a child turns to for tools and know-how. So in the fight against childhood obesity, parent participation is absolutely essential.”

So how best to involve them, in Maclean’s view?

“My experience,” Maclean advises, “both as a parent and as an active PTA member, is above all that you can’t preach to parents. The parents who are aware of a problem don’t need to be lectured to, and finger-wagging at those who aren’t will just turn them off. It’s far more effective for schools and educators to ‘partner’ with a parent, and say, ‘Look, this is the challenge, how can we work together on it?’”

“You’ve got to invite parents in as participants in a problem-solving venture,” Maclean contends, “not admonish, scold, or condescend to them, however well-intentioned the scolding may be. In the end it’s the sharing of responsibility between school and parent, in a relationship of mutual

respect, that draws parents in, and makes them want to reinforce at home what kids are learning at school – about nutrition, about physical activity, about anything.”

Maclean echoes Pennsylvania’s Elaine McDonnell about the ultimate power that parents have. “It’s baffling to me how a lot of parents don’t credit themselves with influence over their own kids’ behavior,” Maclean observes. “But I see it all the time in my own kids, the power I have – a word of encouragement from me goes a long way in helping them do the right thing, even if they don’t like to admit it. And yes, I know how incredibly busy parents are, often working two jobs to support a family, even three jobs sometimes. That’s why it’s incumbent upon schools to give parents ways to contribute in a manner that fits in with their lifestyles and their huge obligations. Some parents are so overcommitted these days that just taking the time to drop kids off for a physical activity on time, and on a regular basis, is a big and important contribution – and schools need to let parents know that even that level of participation and encouragement is hugely valuable. I think of it as ‘encouraging the parents to encourage the kids.’”



ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

4711 West Golf Road, Suite 625
Skokie, Illinois 60076

800-416-5136

To learn more about
Action for Healthy Kids, and
how to join a Team, visit
www.ActionForHealthyKids.org

ABOUT ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

Action for Healthy Kids is a national, non-profit organization addressing the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on changes at school. Action for Healthy Kids is a public-private partnership of more than 50 national organizations and government agencies representing education, health, fitness and nutrition, which support and accelerate the efforts of 51 Action for Healthy Kids Teams (including all states and the District of Columbia) made up of thousands of volunteers.

Former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher is the founding chair of Action For Healthy Kids, which was launched at the 2002 Healthy School Summit in Washington, D.C. Action For Healthy Kids was created in response to *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, which identified the school environment as one of five key sites of change.