

an action for healthy kids report

**Criteria for Evaluating School-Based Approaches to
Increasing Good Nutrition and Physical Activity**



 **Action for Healthy Kids™**

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1. introduction

Increased attention to the rising rates of childhood obesity, coupled with the recognition that changes in the school environment are critical to reducing this trend, has intensified the need to adopt best practices in school nutrition, physical activity and physical education. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity* outlines actions for creating school environments that support healthy nutrition and increased physical activity. These practices are validated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and were developed based on rigorous reviews of the scientific literature and expert opinion. These practices have become the gold standard for schools that want to make healthy changes.

To facilitate implementation of these practices, schools can adopt a wide array of policies, programs, interventions and practices. However, because this range of options is quite broad, it can be challenging for schools to identify the right method to increase physical activity and improve nutrition among their students. Schools and school districts are diverse, and each has unique needs and different levels of resources at its disposal. As different schools consider which approaches to adopt, some prove more effective or appropriate than others. Without a set of standard criteria with which to evaluate a specific approach's feasibility, it is difficult to assess which approaches are best for meeting a school's needs and have the greatest potential for success.

Schools face an additional challenge in achieving stakeholder buy-in. In general, there are four stakeholder groups involved in the implementation and evaluation of any school-based approach:

- **Decision makers** – those who decide to adopt the program
- **Implementers** – those who deliver the program
- **Partners** – those who actively support the program
- **Participants** – those who are served

Stakeholder buy-in is more likely when the priorities of those who will adopt, implement, participate and be held accountable for the results of a school-based approach are addressed. This sometimes fails to happen as specific policies, programs, interventions and practices are being developed, as well as when they are being evaluated for feasibility or effectiveness.

The CDC and other national organizations have emphasized the importance of including all relevant stakeholders in the implementation of school-based approaches. It is equally vital to consider each of these stakeholders' perspectives when developing criteria to evaluate the feasibility of a given approach and its potential for success. However, stakeholder-sensitive evaluation criteria that can help schools determine the value and feasibility of an approach prior to investing in implementation has been lacking.

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK), a nonprofit organization created in response to *The Surgeon General's Call to Action*, recognized this tremendous need and took action. AFHK received funding from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to develop standard, stakeholder-sensitive criteria for evaluating school-based approaches for improving nutrition and increasing physical activity in children. Most importantly, AFHK included potential stakeholders in the criteria development process.

AFHK is a nationwide initiative that acts to decrease the incidence of childhood obesity by improving nutrition and increasing physical activity in schools, which will improve children's readiness to learn. Its guiding document, *Commitment to Change*, which was adapted from *The Surgeon General's Call to Action*, outlines best practices that AFHK is helping schools to adopt in order to promote good nutrition and increased physical activity among children.

ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS —COMMITMENT TO CHANGE GOALS¹

- **Provide age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instruction in health education and physical education that helps students develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors to adopt, maintain and enjoy healthy eating habits and a physically active lifestyle.**
- **Provide students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 with behavior-focused nutrition education integrated into the curriculum that is interactive and teaches the skills they need to adopt healthy eating habits.**
- **Ensure that meals offered through all school feeding programs meet federal nutrition standards.**
- **Adopt policies ensuring that all foods and beverages available on school campuses and at school events contribute toward eating patterns that are consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.**
- **Provide food options that are low in fat, calories and added sugars, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat or nonfat dairy foods.**
- **Ensure that healthy snacks and foods are provided in vending machines, school stores and other venues within the school's control.**
- **Prohibit student access to vending machines, school stores, and other venues that contain foods of minimal nutritional value and compete with healthy school meals in elementary schools and restrict access in middle, junior and high schools.**
- **Provide an adequate amount of time for students to eat school meals, and schedule lunch periods at reasonable hours around midday.**
- **Provide all children, from pre-kindergarten through grade 12, with quality daily physical education that helps develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, behaviors and confidence needed to be physically active for life.**
- **Provide daily recess periods for elementary school students, featuring time for unstructured but supervised active play.**
- **Provide adequate co-curricular physical activity programs, including fully inclusive intramural programs and physical activity clubs.**
- **Encourage the use of school facilities for physical activity programs offered by the school and/or community-based organizations outside of school hours.**

¹ Based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity. Rockville, Md.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General, 2001.

AFHK is a collaboration of more than 40 national organizations and government agencies representing the education, health, fitness and nutrition communities. At the national level, AFHK accelerates the work of its 51 State Teams to improve nutrition and physical activity opportunities in schools by providing resources, facilitating the exchange of information and expertise among teams, and evaluating and disseminating school-based programs and practices.

As part of its efforts, AFHK developed the “What’s Working” online database to disseminate replicable policies, programs, interventions and practices. AFHK’s partners surveyed their constituents for examples of successful approaches. Each approach was reviewed before it was included in the database, however rigorous evaluations were not conducted since no set of standard criteria existed. This was one of many factors that led AFHK to develop a set of criteria for use in evaluating school-based approaches.

The final criteria developed from this project are a valuable new tool for schools across the nation. They can be applied to existing school-based policies, programs, interventions and practices, and they can be used as guidelines for developing new ones. Through their application, stakeholders can be confident that an approach will meet their needs and have high potential for success. Consistent use of these standard criteria will improve the quality of approaches and help ensure easier replication.

This report describes the methodology for developing the evaluation criteria, lists the actual criteria, and suggests incentives for encouraging the adoption of school-based approaches to increase children’s good nutrition and physical activity.



2. criteria development methodology

FORMATION OF AN EXPERT PANEL

AFHK recruited an expert panel to ensure the new criteria would be meaningful to a diverse range of stakeholders. The panel comprised 31 experts representing 27 national organizations and government agencies. Key stakeholders represented by the panel included:

- Administrators
- Teachers
- Parents
- Students
- Nutrition and school food service professionals
- School health professionals
- Physical activity and education providers
- Community
- Government
- Higher education
- Minority populations

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CRITERIA DEVELOPMENT

A Three-Phase Process

The process of establishing stakeholder-sensitive criteria was completed in three progressive phases:

- **Phase I** – Development of initial criteria
- **Phase II** – Evaluation and refinement of criteria
- **Phase III** – Application of criteria to approaches in AFHK's "What's Working" database

During Phase I, expert panelists provided input regarding what characterized a "best practice" for the four types of school-based approaches to increasing physical activity and good nutrition. These types of approaches include:

- **Policy** – An officially determined objective that guides the action of students and employees in the education system.
- **Intervention** – A specific approach implemented during a set test period, usually involving pre- and post-information to measure success; considered short term.

- **Program** – Similar to an intervention except that it is in place in an ongoing fashion, not just during a particular test period.
- **Practice** – Something that is performed on a regular basis as standard operating procedure.

AFHK gathered information from the panelists and developed a list of potential criteria for each type of approach. These were reviewed for similarities and differences and resulted in a core list of criteria common to all. Additionally, panelists identified those criteria unique to each type of innovation (e.g., criteria important to policies but not programs).

In Phase II, panelists explored the role of stakeholder priorities in the development of criteria. Panelists responded to a written survey indicating what they considered to be the most important characteristics and success indicators of a “best practice” from the point of view of their stakeholder group. They were also asked to rank the criteria developed during Phase I and provide information regarding incentives that would motivate a school to adopt an approach.

The survey results were categorized and then analyzed. Two levels of criteria became apparent:

- **Essential Criteria** – Those criteria receiving the highest combined rank.
- **Critical Criteria** – Criteria selected based on a combination of rank and information gathered from stakeholders closest to the school environment (e.g., teachers, administrators, school food service staff, students and school nurses).

Overall, results indicated that there were more similarities than differences in the criteria across all four types of approaches, eliminating the need to develop unique criteria for each. However, there were several criteria identified as being particularly noteworthy for evaluating policy. These are listed later in the report.

In Phase III panelists applied these criteria to specific approaches in AFHK’s “What’s Working” database. This process served three purposes:

- It assessed the Essential Criteria’s effectiveness by testing their application to a wide array of policies, programs, interventions and practices.
- It provided a rigorous review of the entire database.
- It aligned the approaches contained in the database with AFHK’s *Commitment to Change* goals.

Each expert panelist applied the Essential Criteria to three or four approaches in the database to assess and confirm the breadth of the criteria’s applicability as an evaluation tool. Final recommendations were made as to whether each approach should remain in the database.



3. the criteria

The majority of expert panelists identified 10 criteria as essential elements for evaluating school-based approaches. An additional five criteria were considered critical for the actual adoption and implementation of an approach. The Essential Criteria represent the level of standards for which all approaches in nutrition and physical activity should strive. The Critical Criteria address priorities that are most important to the adoption and implementation of the four types of approaches. Together, these criteria provide a comprehensive assessment tool for evaluating and developing school-based approaches.

ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING SCHOOL-BASED APPROACHES

1. The approach is based on professional theories and is consistent with professional and/or national standards of practice.
2. The approach is practical and realistic.
3. The goal/purpose of the approach is clearly stated and easy to understand by multiple audiences.
4. The approach has specific and measurable objectives that address one or more of the following:
 - a) Knowledge
 - b) Attitudes
 - c) Skills
 - d) Behaviors
 - e) Policy
 - f) School environment
5. The approach is a) age or developmentally appropriate and b) culturally relevant.
6. The approach is a) engaging to students, b) interactive and c) skills-based.
7. The approach can be adapted to a variety of situations and environments.
8. The approach can be assessed and monitored and includes an evaluation component.
9. The goals of the approach are supported by results from evaluation data.
10. The approach supports easy implementation by providing the following:
 - a) Clearly written and user-friendly instructions
 - b) Training resources
 - c) Contact information to obtain technical support or additional resources
 - d) Instructions or materials in languages in addition to English

CRITICAL CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING SCHOOL-BASED APPROACHES

After applying the Essential Criteria, an approach's adoptability can be assessed by applying the five Critical Criteria. These five criteria reflect the needs of those stakeholders directly responsible for adoption and implementation.

1. The approach is cost-effective and resources (e.g., staff, budget, grant dollars) are available for its implementation.
2. The approach fits into required school mandates, has a positive effect on student achievement outcomes and would help to meet state nutrition and physical activity standards.
3. The approach can be integrated across curricula, feasibly implemented within a school schedule and aligned with a coordinated school health model.
4. The approach has strong support from critical audiences (e.g., students, parents, teachers and administrators), and all relevant stakeholders were involved with its planning.
5. The approach is sustainable, not just a one-time or irregularly implemented event.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR "BEST PRACTICES" IN POLICIES

Both the Essential and Critical Criteria apply for all types of approaches: policies, programs, interventions and practices. However, expert panelists discussed the criteria for determining the value of a particular policy and several additional considerations were identified.

Stakeholder Buy-In

Several panelists believe, as does the National Association of State Boards of Education, that the process for policy development is as important as the policy itself.

- "Buy-in from the greatest number of people is important."
- "Key stakeholders must be involved in policy development – especially students and others that are ultimately affected by the policy."

Enforcement

Policies are best when provisions that address the accountability associated with policy implementation are included; enforcement issues and mechanisms for consistency are considerations during development.

Implementation

Policies need to address implementation. This would include developing guidelines and addressing needs for the adoption phase, such as teacher certification and training.

Financial Considerations

Policies need to consider the financial aspect – "be budget neutral" or have resources for implementation.

Connections to Curricula

An important consideration is for the policy to be tied to curricula in some way.

4. incentives for adopting health-promoting approaches

Panelists also developed a list of incentives for schools to adopt approaches for improving nutrition and increasing physical activity. Panelists articulated four areas where incentives are needed most.

TEACHER AND SCHOOL SUPPORT

Availability of financing, materials and training are key considerations for adopting school-based approaches. For example, financial reimbursement for teacher training is important for approaches involving teachers. Available grants and funding for implementation are important for approaches requiring resources beyond those provided by the school. Donations for school equipment or technology and reduced cost of associated materials are strong incentives, as are student incentives (e.g., equipment, materials, prizes).

Teachers want training that includes feedback mechanisms and support materials for students and parents. The time of year during which training and continuing education sessions are available is a very important consideration. Administrators stated that summer is the best time for such offerings; teachers expressed that training should not interfere with classroom time. Reimbursement for teachers' and administrators' time at trainings may be needed for full participation. In addition, ongoing technical assistance and curriculum support also are strong motivators.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION

Public recognition and support energizes health-promoting approaches. Many expert panelists cited local media recognition, district and/or national awards, school banners and articles in peer journals as important incentives. Support from parents and the community also is critical.

CONNECTIONS TO SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

An approach is more likely to be successfully adopted if it is positively linked to academic achievement or addresses key areas of accountability. The developers of the approach and its scientific soundness, or consistency with national guidance and expertise, are also critical considerations for its adoption.

PROVEN IMPLEMENTATION AND EASE OF USE

Successful outcomes in a similar student population and school system also provide important incentives for school decision-makers. Approaches that are easy to implement, include support materials and provide contacts for further information can enhance the likelihood that they will be adopted. Approaches that are viewed as "cutting-edge," and have a low possibility of failure, also are attractive. Personal demonstration by peers, which offers networking opportunities, provides further appeal.

5. evaluation of the “what’s working” database

To ensure the value of AFHK’s “What’s Working” database, each approach currently in the database was assessed using the Essential Criteria. Since these approaches were collected prior to the development of these new criteria, some database entries do not include sufficient information to apply all of the Essential Criteria. Therefore, a scoring scheme was developed that would not penalize approaches based on a lack of information or inapplicability of a criterion to a particular approach. Following is the scoring scheme and a sample evaluation form.

Scoring for Essential Criteria:

- Criteria were fully met = 3 points
- Criteria were partially met = 1 point
- Criteria were not met at all = 0 points

Scores for approaches in the “What’s Working” database were tallied, divided by the number of criteria evaluated (excluding those that were not applicable or did not have information), and then multiplied by 100 for the total score.

SAMPLE EVALUATION FORM

Name of Approach/Program: _____

Reviewer Name: _____

Essential Criteria – Standards Assessment for School-Based Approaches to Increasing Physical Activity and Good Nutrition	Points Met (place X in box)				
	No (0)	Partial (1)	Yes (3)	N/A	N/I
1. The approach is based on professional theories and is consistent with professional and/or national standards of practice.					
2. The approach is practical and realistic.					
3. The goal/purpose of the approach is clearly stated and easy to understand by multiple audiences.					
4. The approach has specific and measurable objectives that address one or more of the following: a. Knowledge b. Attitudes					

Essential Criteria – Standards Assessment for School-Based Approaches to Increasing Physical Activity and Good Nutrition

	Points Met (place X in box)				
	No (0)	Partial (1)	Yes (3)	N/A	N/I
c. Skills d. Behaviors e. Policy f. School environment					
5. The approach is: a. Age or developmentally appropriate b. Culturally relevant					
6. The approach is: a. Engaging to students b. Interactive c. Skills-based					
7. The approach can be adapted to a variety of situations and environments.					
8. The approach can be assessed and monitored and includes an evaluation component.					
9. The goals of the approach are supported by results from evaluation data.					
10. The approach supports easy implementation by providing the following: a. Clearly written and user-friendly instructions b. Training resources c. Contact information to obtain technical support or additional resources d. Instructions or materials in languages in addition to English					
Total points for Essential Criteria by column:					
Essential Criteria Total Points:					

Critical Criteria – Adoptability/Implementation Assessment	Points Met (place X in box)				
	No (0)	Partial (1)	Yes (3)	N/A	N/I
1. The approach is cost-effective and resources (staff, budget, grant dollars) are available for its implementation.					
2. The approach fits into required school mandates, has a positive effect on student achievement outcomes and would help to meet state nutrition and physical activity standards.					
3. The approach can be integrated across curricula, feasibly implemented within a school schedule, and aligned with a coordinated school health model.					
4. The approach has strong support from critical audiences (e.g., students, parents, teachers and administrators) and all relevant stakeholders were involved with its planning.					
5. The approach is sustainable, not just a one-time or irregularly implemented event.					
Total points for Critical Criteria by column:					
Critical Criteria Total Points:					
Grand Total Score - add all points, divide by the number of criteria evaluated (excluding those that were not applicable or did not have information), multiply by 100 for Total Score:					

SCORING RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION:

- 250 to 300 points: Excellent
- 200 to 249 points: Makes the grade
- 150 to 199 points: Shows potential

There were a total of 107 approaches in the “What’s Working” database and each was evaluated. Review of the completed evaluations indicated that the Essential Criteria were applicable to a broad range of approaches, effective in providing adequate sensitivity to stakeholder priorities and easy to use as an evaluation tool. Evaluation results yielded a median score of 214 with a wide range in scores, from 0 to 300. The majority of the “What’s Working” approaches received scores between 200 and 300. Forty-one of these had scores from 250 to 300 and 31 scored between 200 and 250. Thirteen had scores between 151 and 200, 14 had scores between 100 and 150 and eight had scores below 100. For purposes of the database assessment, it was determined that approaches between 250 and 300 represented the best of those currently in the “What’s Working” database.

SOME OF THE BEST APPROACHES IN THE ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS “WHAT’S WORKING” DATABASE

Adapted Physical Education Program

The Adapted Physical Education Program is designed to increase the lifetime wellness skills of students with disabilities. It is directed by a state-endorsed, nationally certified adapted physical educator. The program focuses on improving students’:

- motor development and coordination
- individual and team skills
- independent and recreational skills
- physical fitness and activity
- health/wellness

Students in the program participate in the President’s Physical Fitness and Health Challenge for children with disabilities. Student self-esteem, confidence and success are encouraged in every part of the program.

Essential Criteria Score 280

Breakfast in the Classroom

This program provides breakfast to students to help them be more attentive in the classroom and to increase their readiness to learn and achieve. Principals, teachers and nurses have reported positive changes in the learning environment, student attentiveness and student behavior as a result of implementing this program.

Essential Criteria Score 276

Body Weight and Body Image Lessons for Adolescents

The Body Weight and Body Image curriculum is designed to provide educators with the resources to help middle and high school students adopt healthful weight management practices, engage in appropriate physical activity patterns and develop positive body image. The curriculum contains seven multidisciplinary hands-on lessons that can be taught in health, family and consumer sciences, math and statistics in grades six through 12.

Essential Criteria Score 270

CookShop Program

The CookShop Program® uses hands-on cooking to promote awareness and consumption of plant-based foods in New York City’s low-income communities. CookShop® connects classroom-based food and nutrition education with the plant-based foods served in the National School Lunch Program.

Essential Criteria Score 300

Fine Arts Interdisciplinary Resource School

The FAIR School, a fourth- through eighth-grade magnet school in Crystal, Minnesota, has implemented one of the state’s first extensive nutrition and physical activity policies/programs. The goal of the program is to make healthier food selections and physical activity an integral part of the education day and to foster healthful nutrition and physical activity behaviors in students.

Essential Criteria Score 280

Gold Medal School Initiative

This initiative encourages schools to establish policy and environmental supports that give students and staff more opportunities for physical activity and nutritious food choices. Schools have three years to meet a set of criteria, and are assigned a mentor to give one-on-one assistance and help implement actions to meet the criteria. Upon meeting the criteria the school is awarded up to \$1000 for physical education equipment and/or nutrition services.

Essential Criteria Score 265

Healthy Hearts

Healthy Hearts is an Internet instructional (e-learning) module designed to teach intermediate-grade children about cardiovascular health, focusing on the effects of physical activity and nutrition on the heart. This is a school-based curricular intervention that encourages children to participate in physical activity regularly and to eat properly. The instructional module is designed to improve children's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to these risk factors associated with cardiovascular health. It encourages youngsters to read, write and problem solve, while learning to make wise decisions that will affect them throughout their lifetime.

Essential Criteria Score 300

Secondary Level Interdisciplinary Curriculum

Secondary Level Interdisciplinary Curriculum (SLIC) is designed to focus on critical nutrition concerns of adolescents within the context of everyday life, and to help students develop knowledge and skills in nutrition and health that will enable them to succeed in an ever-changing world. This nutrition curriculum comprised of five multidisciplinary thematic units can be taught in ninth- through twelfth-grade classes in American history, algebra and pre-algebra, consumer math, English, business education, biology, chemistry, environmental science, family and consumer sciences and health. The five units are titled Special Concerns in Nutrition, Alternative Eating, Disordered Eating, Physical Activity, and Food Safety.

Essential Criteria Score 282

6. conclusion

The great diversity in school systems around the country necessitates a rich supply of school-based approaches to increasing physical activity and improving nutrition that meet criteria measuring potential effectiveness and adoptability. For many years, no standard criteria existed that could be applied to a broad range of policies, programs, interventions and practices. Action for Healthy Kids has successfully filled this gap with the set of criteria it has developed. Application of the Essential and Critical Criteria not only will reveal an approach's potential for meeting the Surgeon General's recommendations, but also will address the priorities of those who adopt, implement and, ultimately, are held accountable for the results of an approach.

Action for Healthy Kids will continue to identify, evaluate and disseminate the policies, programs, interventions and practices that can help schools establish best practices in nutrition, physical education and physical activity.

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ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS PARTNER STEERING COMMITTEE

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American Academy of Pediatrics
American Association of School Administrators
American Diabetes Association
American Dietetic Association
American Federation of Teachers
American Public Health Association
American School Health Association
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Association of School Business Officials International
Association of State and Territorial Chronic Disease Program Directors
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors
Council of Chief State School Officers
Family, Career and Community Leaders of America
Food Research and Action Center
National Association for Sport and Physical Education
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners
National Association of School Nurses
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Association of Student Councils
National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity
National Dairy Council
National Future Farmers of America Organization/Foundation
National Education Association — Health Information Network
National Medical Association
National Middle School Association
National PTA
National School Boards Association
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
School Nutrition Association
Society for Nutrition Education
Society of State Directors of Health, Physical Education and Recreation
U.S. Department of Agriculture — Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. Department of Education — Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — Office of Disease Prevention
and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and
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