

an action for healthy kids report

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



 Action for Healthy Kids™

the problem

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 good nutrition and increased physical activity.

Schools are challenged by the breadth of school-based approaches (policies, programs, interventions and practices) for implementing these goals or “best practices” and increasing the physical activity and good nutrition of their students. Without a set of standard criteria to evaluate a specific approach’s potential success, it is difficult to assess which approaches are best for meeting a particular school’s needs and have the greatest potential for success.

Schools face an additional challenge in achieving stakeholder support. The priorities of those who will adopt, implement, participate and be held accountable for results are sometimes absent in the development of an approach or the criteria to evaluate an approach’s feasibility and potential for success.

Even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other national organizations have emphasized the importance of addressing the needs of relevant stakeholders, stakeholder-sensitive evaluation criteria to help schools assess the feasibility of various approaches have been lacking.

working for a solution

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 increasing good nutrition and physical activity in children. Most importantly, AFHK included a diverse group of 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. A collaboration of more than 40 national organizations and government agencies representing the education, health, fitness and nutrition fields, AFHK helps to accelerate the work of its 51 State Teams by providing resources, facilitating the exchange of information and expertise among teams, and evaluating and disseminating programs and practices to improve nutrition and physical activity opportunities in schools. AFHK’s “What’s Working” database of school-based approaches is among the many resources available.

the project

This project set out to develop, test and apply a set of stakeholder-sensitive criteria for evaluating school-based approaches for increasing children’s physical activity and good nutrition. The resulting criteria will help education decision-makers evaluate prospective approaches, shape the development of new approaches by providing criteria to serve as guidelines, and help potential donors evaluate the success of approaches that are being considered for funding.

METHODOLOGY

AFHK convened a panel of 31 experts from 27 national organizations and government agencies representing education decision-makers, teachers, government officials, higher education, nutrition, school food service, school health, minority populations, community leaders, parents and students. The full list of panelists can be found at the end of this document.

Through three progressive phases, the expert panel defined and then refined criteria. In Phase I, panelists identified criteria common to four approaches for attaining best practices: policies, programs, interventions and practices. In Phase II, panelists used a written survey to rank the criteria based on stakeholder orientation. They also suggested incentives that motivate action among their stakeholders. In Phase III, panelists tested the criteria by applying them to approaches contained in AFHK's "What's Working" database, scoring each approach on the extent to which each criterion was met.

RESULTS

The expert panel determined two levels of criteria: Essential Criteria and Critical Criteria. Essential Criteria are the core standards that all approaches should meet, such as having a clearly articulated goal/purpose or being developmentally appropriate. Critical Criteria relate specifically to how easily an approach can be implemented, such as whether an initiative is cost-effective. Together, the Essential and Critical Criteria provide a comprehensive tool for evaluating school-based approaches for increasing children's physical activity and improving nutrition.

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

The next level of assessment addresses adoption and implementation of school-based approaches.

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.



In addition to the Essential and Critical Criteria, the expert panel generated a list of incentives that their stakeholders feel are important for adopting a particular approach. Examples of these incentives include providing support for teacher training, having an initiative recognized by the school or in media coverage, positively linking an approach to achievement and/or accountability, and proving that an approach has been successfully implemented at another school.

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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