Creating Healthy Schools
(from The Surgeon General’s Vision for a Healthy and Fit Nation, 2010)

Schools play a pivotal role in preventing obesity among children and teenagers. Each school day provides multiple opportunities for students to learn about health and practice healthy behaviors that affect weight, including physical activity and good nutrition. Well-designed school programs can promote physical activity and healthy eating, reduce the rate of overweight and obesity among children and teenagers, and improve academic achievement.57-64

To ensure that nutrition and physical activity programs are effective, school administrations need physical education specialists, health education specialists, and certified food service staff. Schools should encourage and reinforce healthy dietary behaviors by providing nutritious and appealing foods and beverages in all venues accessible to students, including the cafeteria, vending machines, school stores, and concession stands. A substantial percentage of students’ recommended physical activity can be provided through a comprehensive school-based physical activity program that includes high-quality physical education, recess and other physical activity breaks, intramurals and physical activity clubs, interscholastic sports, and walk- and bike-to-school initiatives.65-66

High-quality physical education gives young people a chance to learn the skills needed to establish and maintain physically active lifestyles throughout their lives. States and local school districts set requirements for physical activity levels.

In 2006, few schools provided daily physical education or its equivalent for the entire school year to all students.67 Nationwide, only 30% of high school students attended physical education classes 5 days in an average school week, compared with 42% in 1991.68

To help students develop healthy habits, schools should have comprehensive wellness plans that include:

- An active school health council to guide health-related policy decisions.
- A planned and sequential health education curriculum for pre-kindergarten through grade 12. This curriculum should be based on national standards and address a clear set of behavioral outcomes that empower students to make healthy dietary choices and meet physical activity recommendations.
- A school and school workplace wellness policy that includes teachers and other school employees to model healthy behaviors.
- A comprehensive professional development and credentialing program for staff that addresses health education, physical education, food service, and health services.
- Partnerships with parent-teacher organizations, families, and community members to support healthy eating and physical activity policies and programs.

To promote healthy nutrition, schools should:

- Establish nutrition standards that promote healthy nutritious foods.
• Ensure availability of appealing, healthy food options that enable students to comply with recommendations in the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins.

• Use presentation, marketing, and education techniques to encourage students to eat more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins and to drink more water and low-fat or non-fat beverages.

• Make sure water is available throughout the school setting.

• Limit amounts of high calorie snack options, including beverages in vending machines.

To promote physical activity, school systems should:

• Require daily physical education for students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12, allowing 150 minutes per week for elementary schools and 225 minutes per week for secondary schools.

• Require and implement a planned and sequential physical education curriculum for pre-kindergarten through grade 12 that is based on national standards.

• Require at least 20 minutes daily recess for all students in elementary schools.

• Offer students opportunities to participate in intramural physical activity programs during after-school hours.

• Implement and promote walk- and bike-to-school programs.

• Establish joint use agreements with local government agencies to allow use of school facilities for physical activity programs offered by the school or community-based organizations outside of school hours.