

Walking forum report shows need to expand physical activity in schools

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With childhood obesity expanding to epidemic proportions in the United States, educators, researchers and health practitioners are actively seeking to identify effective means of addressing this public-health crisis.

Among the solutions proposed by teachers, researchers and others who met during a roundtable discussion of the issues at a major international conference at the University of Illinois, is the integration of physical activity programming throughout the curriculum in the nation's schools. In other words, the group recommended that physical activity no longer be confined to the domain of the physical education classes.

"There are a number of steps that can be taken to accomplish this," said U. of I. kinesiology and community health professor Weimo (pronounced WE-moh) Zhu, the lead organizer of the "Walking for Health" conference. For example, "science teachers can teach the science behind physical activity – theories about energy transfer. Or teachers can combine graphics and arts, going on a walk to look at different parts of the city."

A summary of the group's findings and recommendations was compiled in a recently published consensus report titled "We Move the Kids." The report – along with 10 others by conference participants – was published this past summer in a supplemental volume of *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* (Vol. 40, No. 7), the journal of the American College of Sports Medicine. The ACSM was a co-sponsor of the 2005 walking

conference with the U. of I.

Zhu called the supplement "the most comprehensive collection of the current literature on walking."

The "We Move the Kids" roundtable discussion and follow-up report focused on strategies for promoting physical activity, integrating physical activity with other health behaviors in school curricula, and potential barriers to accomplishing these goals.

"There was a general recommendation to go beyond what happens in the P.E. class, and to try to create a healthy environment for the children during school and after school across the curriculum," said Wojtek Chodzko-Zajko (VOY-tek HODGE-koh-zye-koh), the head of the kinesiology and community health department and a co-author of the roundtable report.

Chodzko-Zajko said the concept of integrating topics across the curriculum is not necessarily a new pedagogical idea.

"It's very common, especially at the elementary level. So, if there's a major theme occurring – elections, or some big national event – it's not unusual for elementary schools to integrate that across the curriculum, in math, geography, social sciences. The idea here is that concepts not only in physical activity, but concepts in wellness, need to be integrated.

"If you talk to the pedagogy people, they say two things: Kids need physical education, where they learn motor skills and activities that are going to set them up to develop the competencies they need to be physically active. But they also need to know how to be regularly physically active.

"So there's a double mission. The school has a responsibility to educate

them in motor skills but also provide students with an opportunity to be active."

And, Chodzko-Zajko said, "many schools are failing in both regards, without question."

He noted that while schools are federally mandated to have wellness plans, many – including those within walking distance of the site of the 2005 walking conference – don't employ teachers trained specifically in physical education.

"That's amazing, really, when you think of it," he said.

On a more positive note, U. of I. kinesiology professor Amelia Woods, another co-author of the "We Move the Kids" report who has worked one on one with teachers in Champaign, Ill., elementary schools, said "there are some really innovative physical educators in this community."

Woods, who is the author of the book "Interdisciplinary Teaching Through Physical Education," pointed to Wendy Huckstadt at Bottenfield School and Wendy Starwalt at Carey Busey, both in Champaign. Among the strategies they employ in the classroom are ones recommended in the roundtable report, such as using pedometers and other motivational devices; offering rewards and incentives; and setting individual and group goals.

"Wendy Huckstadt organized a program called the Mileage Club, where students can cover a quarter-mile track before and after school, at recess and sometimes during physical education to earn little plastic foot charms," Woods said. "Once they cover five miles, they earn a charm. The charms are put on necklaces. Teachers and students all wear them."

Woods said after school, parents come to pick up their children, and it's

not unusual to see students, parents and teachers all walking around the track after school.

"It's really awesome," she said.

Starwalt has done many innovative things as well. "She also incorporates the foot charms in her program, and has introduced 'Fitness Fridays,' to try to emphasize the benefits of physical activity," Woods said.

Chodzko-Zajko noted that one of the major hurdles he and his colleagues face is getting society to abandon old notions of physical education in the schools.

"The challenge, I think, is that people have come to think that children should get their physical activity in P.E. class, and they're lucky if they have one class a week," he said. "So, we need to help the kids track their activity using pedometers. But they can't be expected to get that activity (only) during P.E. class."

In addition to encouraging the systemic inclusion of physical activity and wellness in the classroom, recommendations in the "We Move the Kids" report include strategies for educators, school administrators, and even parents and communities.

Among them:

- positioning physical-education teachers as role models not just for students, but other teachers as well.
- supporting student participation in sports clubs and other physical-activity opportunities.
- opening gyms, pools, playgrounds and other school facilities to

students and community members before and after school hours.

- providing administrators with information about health benefits of physical activity and information about childhood obesity and inactivity.

- offering in-service training to educate non-P.E. teachers on ways to build activity into their curricula.

- creating collaborative partnerships involving teachers, parents, businesses and professional associations that advocate the benefits of physical activity.

- organizing annual health fairs or physical-activity events that emphasize the importance of physically active lifestyles for people of all ages.

Along with Chodzko-Zajko, Woods and Zhu, additional co-authors of the roundtable report are U. of I. kinesiology and community health professors Darla Castelli and Kim Graber. Castelli and Graber organized a subsequent conference at Illinois last fall called Physical Activity in Contemporary Education to further promote the importance of integrated physical-activity and wellness programs in schools and communities.

Another conference participant contributing an article to the journal supplement is David M. Buchner, former chief of the Physical Activity and Health branch in the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Buchner joined the U. of I. kinesiology and community health department this fall as director of the university's new master of public health degree program, which will be offered beginning in fall 2009. He also leads the writing team responsible for drafting the federal

government's first-ever "Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans"; the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is expected to issue the guidelines in October.

Buchner's journal article, "The Importance of Walking to Public Health," co-authored with Harvard University professor I-Min Lee, serves in part as a review of the existing body of research on walking for health purposes. The article also considers the type of walking that produces the greatest health benefits and considers methodological issues relevant to epidemiologic studies on the relationship between walking and health.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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