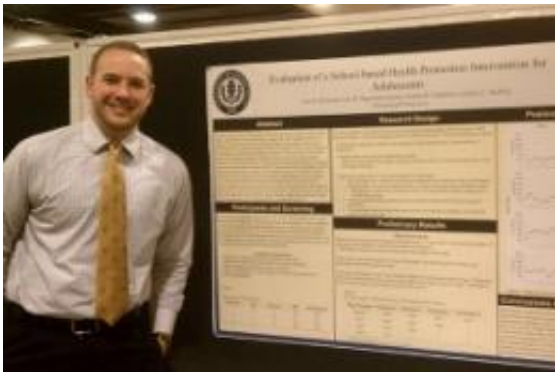


# School psychologists can play key role in reducing obesity, raising scores

November 8 2012, by Cindy Wolfe Boynton

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Scott McCarthy stands with a poster outlining his research. Credit: Neag School of Education photo

(Medical Xpress)—How school psychologists can help students prevent obesity and, in turn, achieve academic success is the focus of a study conducted by Neag School of Education researchers and published in the National Association of School Psychologists' *School Psychology Forum*.

Based on research conducted by [educational psychology](#) doctoral student Scott McCarthy for his dissertation, the study, "The Link Between [Obesity](#) and Academics: School Psychologists' Role in Collaborative Prevention," outlines for educators what McCarthy calls a "practical and sustainable" plan for school psychologists like himself to implement interventions such as increased [regular physical activity](#) and [nutrition education](#) that, among other benefits, can help improve academic

achievement.

"It's proven that obesity leads to physical health problems such as diabetes and emotional problems like depression, as well as to other troublesome, negative results like [social isolation](#), being bullied, and low self-esteem," says McCarthy, who in addition to pursuing his Ph.D. works full-time as a public [school psychologist](#) in Greenwich. "The science of how weight influences [students'](#) school performance is still emerging, but real evidence is there and as educators, we need to be concerned and begin conceptualizing what we can do to help students succeed."

Although a concrete cause-and-effect relationship between [childhood obesity](#) and academic performance has not yet been concretely established, research conducted by organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and American Academy of Pediatrics – along with additional studies published in journals like the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#) and [Preventative Medicine](#) – make the connection impossible to ignore, McCarthy says. Results of these studies and others show that students who are overweight or obese score lower on standardized measures of academic achievement, as well as perform worse in the classroom.

Emerging research, however, suggest that when students lose weight, their grades improve. School-directed initiatives and best practices shown to be effective include:

- Walking for 15 minutes before the start of class;
- Having gym every day;
- Incorporating nutrition and obesity education into health and science classes;
- Eliminating sugary soft drinks from school lunch options and adding more vegetables and fruits;

- Getting rid of school soda and candy vending machines;
- Providing parents and school staff with nutrition and obesity education;
- Adding intramurals or other afterschool programs that give students additional opportunities for physical activity.

In addition, schools in nine states (Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Maine, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and West Virginia) annually conduct Body Mass Index (BMI) screenings to determine whether students' degree of body fat, or BMI, make them obese according to national and [CDC guidelines](#).

School psychologists, whose roles include working to identify subgroups of students with special needs, are in an ideal position to advocate for, encourage, or coordinate these kinds of efforts, the Neag study says.

"What's important about Scott's paper is that it not just shows the connection between a healthy weight and academic success, but that it provides simple interventions that can be integrated into health and science classes, at lunch time, or at other points during the school day," says Lisa Sanetti, an assistant professor and research scientist in the Neag School of Education. Sanetti served as a co-author of the study, along with Neag doctoral student Lindsay Fallon.

McCarthy says it is equally important that these interventions can be maintained: "So many times, schools get funding for great programs that make a difference for a while, but then are dropped when the grant ends or needed resources are no longer available. That's why the suggestions we outline revolve around schools using current staff, and are varied, so educators can pick what might work best based on their specific needs and circumstances."

McCarthy says that while most studies of obesity and academics have

focused on elementary students, middle and high school students need to be included as well: "Ideally, steps can be taken to prevent obesity before it occurs. But at all grade levels, our job as educators is to serve the whole child – not just their academic needs, but their overall health and well-being needs as well. School is a powerful place. Every child spends six or seven hours a day here, so we really can make a difference."

"Researchers will continue to study the connection between academics and obesity," he adds. "But just like schools have implemented programs to show the kids the dangers of doing drugs, or being a bully, schools now need to show the dangers of obesity."

Provided by University of Connecticut

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