

Investigating School Food Policies and Obesity Outcomes from Childhood to Adolescence

Interview with Julie Metos M.P.H., R.D.

Results from Metos' work suggest that school wellness policies can significantly reduce the risk of adolescent obesity. Since children spend most of their time away from home and, consume an estimated 33% of their daily caloric intake, and typically expend 50% of their daily caloric outtake while in school, it is important that schools implement obesity prevention policies.

In her research, she found that associations between schools that implemented the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act wellness policy had lower odds of obesity outcomes. When discussing her findings, Dr. Metos stated that, "while several national groups have reported on positive changes in school food and physical activity following new federal policies, in Utah, we've found there is marked variability in how the policies are implemented, and how they are translated (or not) into school practices."

Ensuring nutrition and physical activity in an academic setting is important for a myriad of reasons. Dr. Metos explains that "students who are well nourished and have regular meals throughout the day perform better than their peers who do not. This is typically measured through grades, attention and ability to focus." She further eludes to research indicating that math scores and focus and behavioral problems also improve after adding recess and physical education in elementary schools.

Childhood health goes beyond the classroom. Dr. Metos reminds us that, "reaching children and adolescents at school with health messages has incredible potential. Even more important is to change the environment to one that is more healthful so that the cultural norms change around what is appropriate to eat and how much physical activity is normal and fun for everyone." By teaching children positive nutrition and physical activity habits, we are able to mitigate some of the health care costs for current children and when they become adults who have medical issues due to under-nutrition or obesity.

As her findings suggest, policy makers should remain focused on school-based wellness programs to combat obesity. Although there has been promising work done to address nutritional outcomes in schools, what has been done is not strong enough and there are schools that are not on board due to resources and prioritization for resources. With her research, Dr. Metos hopes to change that.

Sources: Coffield, J. Edward, Julie M. Metos, Rebecca L. Utz, and Norman J. Waitzman. "A Multivariate Analysis of Federally Mandated School Wellness Policies on Adolescent Obesity." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 49.4 (2011): 363-70. Web.

"Interview with Dr. Julie Metos." E-mail interview. 23 Nov. 2015.