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Using the School Environment to Promote Physical Activity and Healthy Eating

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Abstract

Background. The role of the community environment in shaping dietary and physical activity behaviors has received increasing attention in recent years. Although schools are a key part of the community environment, interventions that promote physical activity and healthy eating among students through changes in the school environment have received relatively little attention.

Method. After reviewing the role of environmental factors in shaping health behavior, this paper describes the various aspects of the school environment that influence physical activity and nutrition behaviors. Relevant research is described and new research directions are proposed for five key environmental influences: recess periods, intramural sports and physical activity programs, physical activity facilities, foods and beverages available at school outside of the school meal program, and nonacademic support for

available at school outside of the school meals program, and psychosocial support for physical activity and healthy eating.

Results. Recess, intramural programs, and access to school physical activity facilities outside of school hours can provide opportunities for health-enhancing physical activity. States, school districts, and schools can establish strong policies and implement creative interventions to promote healthy eating through the foods and beverages offered at school. Schools can offer psychosocial support for physical activity and healthy eating through school policies, administrative commitment, role modeling by school staff, and the use of cues and incentives.

Conclusions. Enough is known from theory, practice, and research to suggest that school-based environmental strategies to promote physical activity and healthy eating among young people merit implementation and ongoing refinement.



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Keywords

physical activity; diet; school; environment.

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