

Getting smart on health



Educators and public health professionals both know that healthier children are better prepared to learn both in and out of school. This makes perfect sense; children affected by health issues are not able to fully focus on their studies and are therefore less likely to perform at their full potential. From the public health perspective, educational attainment is one of the key determinants of lifelong health outcomes; people with higher educational attainment live longer.

While most people recognize the importance of ensuring that all students are healthy and prepared to learn when they are in school, it was only recently that the education and public health fields began collaborating. Traditionally, health professionals viewed their role as strictly informing and educating people about how to make healthy decisions – and when that didn't work they would provide the necessary care to treat the illness. Likewise, educators viewed their role as strictly teaching students about core subjects like Math and English, not recognizing the valuable role they can play in ensuring all students have optimal health and opportunities for the future. The recognition of the important role that schools (i.e. the food and physical activity environments) and supporting policies have on health outcomes and educational attainment has helped bring about this paradigm shift.

The childhood obesity epidemic was one of the major factors that spurred this recognition and subsequent collaboration between health and education. Educators have come to realize that when students are sick or unhealthy they are unable to learn. Given the amount of time kids spend at school, health professionals have begun to look at strategies that ensure the school environment is conducive to help reduce obesity rates and support the health and well-being of its students. The healthy schools movement led by Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* campaign along with many other initiatives across the nation has begun to highlight the importance of addressing health issues at school. Whether its ensuring kids have adequate Physical Education, healthy meals, or social and emotional supports, schools have begun to embrace the holistic approach to education that views the whole child, instead of just individual cognitive ability.

The future for collaboration between the fields of public health and education looks very bright. With various initiatives showing success in addressing health issues related to youth, we can begin to identify best practices to create healthy schools that foster environments that are more conducive to learning. As more policymakers realize the importance of collaboration between the two fields we can expect to see more support for partnerships. Get Healthy San Mateo County will continue to work to forge stronger partnerships with our counterparts in education to ensure that every child can achieve their highest potential and therefore have every opportunity for success and a healthy life. The more we work together – the more successful our efforts to improve educational attainment and overall health will be.

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