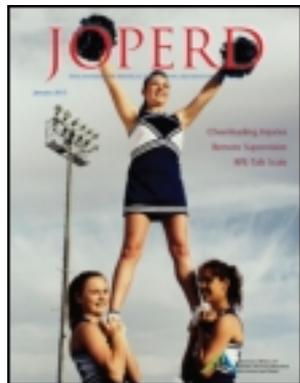


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Wellness Weeks

A Total School Approach for Promoting *Physical Activity* and *Nutrition*

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The need for more physical activity in schools is well established. National physical activity guidelines have been developed to address this need, and the prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM) recently issued a report emphasizing the importance of schools in helping youths meet the guidelines. The IOM report recommends that “school administrators, teachers, and parents should advocate for and create a ‘whole-of-school’ approach to physical activity that fosters and provides access in the school environment to at least 60 minutes per day of vigorous

or moderate intensity physical activity more than half (≥ 50 percent) of which should be accomplished during regular school hours” (IOM, 2013, p. 8-2). This recommendation is consistent with the *Let’s Move!* Active Schools program that provides “unprecedented collaboration to bring physical activity back to American schools” (American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance [AAHPERD], 2013, p. 1). The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance is one of many partners with First Lady Michelle Obama in this program designed to “create active environments where students get 60 minutes of daily physical activity through quality physical education and physical activity before, during, and after school” (AAHPERD, 2013, p. 1). In addition to helping more students meet national physical activity guidelines (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2011), *Let’s Move!* Active Schools (2013) helps youths meet national dietary guidelines (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010). It is one of many programs designed to fight the obesity epidemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2012) and increase the number of youths who meet national health objectives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Parental support for programs designed to increase activity and promote sound nutrition is strong, as evidenced by the fact that 92% consider physical education to be as important as

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science, English, and math; 96% believe that physical activity can improve classroom performance; and 99% believe that good nutrition benefits learning (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009). In spite of this support, budgets often do not favor increased physical activity and nutrition programming when money is tight and an emphasis is placed on high-stakes academic testing.

The purpose of this article is to describe Wellness Weeks as one option for creating comprehensive health-promotion programming in schools. This article begins by defining and providing a rationale for the use of Wellness Weeks. Next, the role of the wellness coordinator in this model is discussed. The following section describes the research studies that have been conducted on Wellness Weeks. Finally, techniques for involving the entire school (e.g., all personnel and students) in implementing Wellness Weeks are discussed.

Let's Move! Active Schools, like *Let's Move in Schools*, the AAHPERD program that preceded it, recommends five key areas of opportunity for activity in schools: (1) comprehensive quality physical education, (2) activity during school, (3) activity before and after school, (4) staff involvement, and (5) family and community involvement. All of these are worthy goals, but a variety of obstacles often limit success. The Wellness Week concept originated to inject physical activity and sound nutrition practices into elementary schools while involving all five active school components. Developed by the authors of *Fitness for Life: Elementary School* (Corbin, Le Masurier, Lambdin, & Griener, 2010), the Wellness Week approach can be implemented by school personnel using a variety of activities and materials.

What Are Wellness Weeks?

A Wellness Week is a one-week period during which the whole school focuses on physical activity and sound nutrition. Consistent with the five components of *Let's Move! Active Schools*, the entire school staff, parents, community members, and students are involved. Special physical education lessons help students learn activities (exercise or brain breaks) that are performed in the classroom during the week under the direction of the classroom teacher. This approach is consistent with the writings of Erwin, Docheff, and Beighle (2010, p. 15), who encouraged “getting

kids moving in the classroom.” Signs are posted in the cafeteria, in classrooms, in the gym, and elsewhere in the school. Discussions about exercise and nutrition are conducted in physical education, in the classroom, and in other instructional settings. The cafeteria staff, with parental assistance, offers special nutritious meals on “Eat Well Wednesday” during each Wellness Week. The art teacher focuses on nutrition and physical activity, librarians feature books on these topics, and the music teachers introduce music that relates to activity and nutrition. The school nurse can be central to many activities during Wellness Week, aiding in many or all of the activities described in this article. The administrative staff can help by reproducing school signs and making daily announcements in support of the program. Research indicates that support from the principal and other administrators is a key to success (Drummond & Celaya, 2012; Hodges, Kulinna, & Kloeppel, 2012).

“Get Fit Friday” features school-wide TEAM time (Together Everyone Achieves More) activities, a concept originated by Meg Griener in Springfield, Oregon. Special programs involving parents are conducted on one night of Wellness Week. Signs are posted at the entrance to all-play areas promoting moderate-to-vigorous play before and after school and at recess. Teachers and parent



Communication with parents is important to Wellness Week success.

volunteers promote active play. A Wellness Week newsletter is sent to parents (electronically when possible) to keep them informed.

Four Wellness Weeks are proposed during each school year—one each nine-week school period. A Wellness Week coordinator is appointed. It may be the physical educator serving in the capacity of school activity director (Beighle & Moore, 2012; Carson, 2012; Castelli & Beighle, 2007; Castelli & Ward, 2012; Rink, 2012), the principal, a classroom teacher, or a parent. For Wellness Weeks to work, a coordinator is critical (Drummond & Celeaya, 2012).



Classroom exercise breaks get kids active and improve academic performance.

Why Wellness Weeks?

Prior to developing Wellness Week materials, the authors of *Fitness for Life: Elementary School* surveyed teachers in several communities. Survey responses were solicited, and exercise breaks were field tested in schools in Arizona and Texas. The goal of the preliminary survey was to find out what classroom and specialist teachers felt they could reasonably implement during their busy day. A daily program during the entire school year would be desirable, but after surveying teachers, it became clear that it is better to start with something realistic than to try to do too much. Classroom teachers were quick to point to the demands related to academic testing and the overload of program materials. Most supported Wellness Week goals but indicated that they would participate only if the expectations were “manageable.”

Specifically, most teachers indicated that they would take “up to 10 minutes” one or two times a day for Wellness Week activities, including exercise breaks and discussions related to exercise and nutrition. Many indicated that they were not well trained in these areas and that this was an impediment to implementation. Most focused on the KISS principle—Keep It Simple for Success!

To accommodate the desires of teachers, it was decided to develop “plug and play” videos that are age and grade specific. It was also decided to develop materials for use by physical educators (when present in the school) to prepare students in the “exercise or brain break” activities to ease teacher apprehension about leading activities. Exercise and nutrition commercials (messages) were embedded in the videos based on research indicating that health messaging is a good way of introducing health concepts (Suls, Walliston, Salovey, & Wegener, 2003). Lesson plans for physical educators and grade-specific lesson plans were developed for each elementary grade (Lambdin et al., 2010) to help teachers in conducting morning exercise breaks (with messages) as well as afternoon exercise or brain breaks designed to integrate with math, language arts, and science. The program activities are supported by the literature indicating

that physical activity is beneficial for academic success in other subject areas (CDC, 2010).

The Wellness Coordinator

Prior to beginning a Wellness Week program, a Wellness Coordinator (WC) is selected. The research suggests that having a coordinator is important to program success. *A Guide for Wellness Coordinators* (Corbin et al., 2010) was developed that includes a list of duties for a school WC, including guidelines for conducting TEAM Time activities, disseminating newsletters, printing and posting school signs, encouraging teacher and parent participation, and training school staff. If a physical educator is present in the school, his or her assumption of duties as WC is consistent with the recommendation of AAHPERD and a number of authors that physical educators serve as school activity directors (Beighle & Moore, 2012; Carson, 2012; Castelli & Beighle, 2007; Castelli & Ward, 2012; Rink, 2012). For Wellness Week implementation, the title of Wellness Coordinator was chosen because the Wellness Week concept includes both nutrition and physical activity program components.

The Wellness Week approach starts with a limited program to ensure success but offers the potential for program expansion as school staff and parents see the value of the concept.

What Research Says About Wellness Weeks

Since the introduction of Wellness Week programs, several research projects have been conducted to determine the extent of its acceptance by students, teachers, and parents. Determining the attitudes of each of these groups increases chances of success for the future (sustainability) and increases the chances of student, teacher, and parent participation. Major findings of two projects, based on survey and interview data, are summarized below.



Special physical education lessons are part of Wellness Week.

The first study yielded the following results (Hodges, Kulinna, & Kloeppel, 2012). Perceptions of the Wellness Week program (multiple weeks) were positive for all groups (students, teachers, and parents), with higher perceptions after program completion than before. Teachers reported that positive student attitudes from the inclusion of physical activity breaks helped “drive” the program and that the program was easy to implement—an important consideration for teacher compliance. Teachers also placed high importance on having easy-to-use materials and administrative support. Observation by the researchers indicated, as would be expected, that fidelity of implementation of the Wellness Weeks varied among teachers with high-level implementation by some and lower-level implementation by others. Student participation in classrooms with high-level fidelity was near 100%.

A second study, part of a federal grant in support of a county-wide approach to coordinated school health in Pima County (AZ) called Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW), yielded useful findings. One hundred and forty-nine School Wellness Coordinators were selected countywide at all levels in K–12. School Health Advisory Councils (SHAC) were also established in each school.

First, Wellness Weeks were established in each school. Survey results indicated that 86% of schools implemented two or more Wellness Weeks, and 47% implemented four or more Wellness Weeks per year. Among participating schools, 95% indicated that they would definitely continue or might continue Wellness Weeks; 65% indicated that they would definitely continue the programs in the future.

Second, among the WCs who were optimistic about continuing during the following school year, the majority explained that the kids enjoyed them, they gave the kids something to look forward to during lunch and after school hours, and that they broke up the monotony during the school day. Some WCs said that the student councils or other student groups were going to lead and organize future Wellness Weeks (Drummond & Celeaya, 2012, p. 24). Eighty-four percent of respondents felt that having a WC was very important to program success. Most (64%) reported serving as coordinator for more than one year. Wellness Coordinators also reported that the School Health Advisory Councils, including parents, students, and members of the community as well as school staff, were useful in program implementation. Wellness Coordinators cited administrative support as a key to success, and 97% said that they had administrative support. They also reported that they “enjoyed,” “loved,” and “learned” from the experience of being a WC and leading a SHAC. They enjoyed their role as a leader for health and wellness, and they expressed pleasure at having an impact on students and on the school health environment through the activities and events that took place (Drummond & Celeaya, 2012, p. 17).

Third, program materials and equipment for physical activity were rated as the most important of all program materials, with virtually all WCs indicating that they were somewhat important or very important. Nearly 75% of the teachers rated the Wellness Week materials at the elementary level as very important (CPPW used *Fitness for Life: Elementary School* materials). Teacher training was also rated as a very important part of the program by participants (74% rated training as very useful).

Fourth, outcomes from the program included WellsAT scores that indicated that local wellness policies improved dramatically as a result of CPPW. It should be noted that CPPW had many program components in addition to Wellness Weeks; however, Wellness Weeks using *Fitness for Life* was the core curriculum used in the



elementary schools. Interviews with teachers and WCs also indicated that the physical activity and nutrition interventions were successful. The Communities Putting Prevention to Work Final Report notes that, “As a result of the *Fitness for Life* training opportunities, many schools are incorporating physical activity in the classroom, and provide activity breaks throughout the day. Also frequently cited were Wellness Weeks where wellness announcements were made in the morning and additional time was spent on physical activity, and wellness events” (Drummond & Celeaya, 2012, p. 23).

Due to the success of the Wellness Week program in Pima County, the Pima County Health Department has institutionalized the program in 175 schools so that it will continue after the end of the grant. They have 125 Wellness Coordinators in elementary schools, 50 middle and high schools, and schools have student-wellness advisory teams that receive a stipend for keeping the Wellness Weeks programs going. In addition, private schools in the area have begun to implement Wellness Weeks, and, based on the success of the Wellness Week concept, Mayor Rothschild of Tucson (AZ) designated one week in November as Wellness Week, and all schools in the area will celebrate Wellness Week during that time.

Implementing Wellness Weeks: Total School Involvement

The Wellness Week concept was conceptualized as a program for the elementary school. It has been successfully implemented in virtually all schools in Pima County, Arizona (Tucson and surrounding schools) with grant assistance. The program has proved to be so successful that both middle-school and high-school programs have adopted the approach in combination with other physical activity and nutrition initiatives both in and out of schools. More information is available at www.healthypima.org. The Paradise Valley Unified School District (AZ), Kyrene de la Colina Elementary School (Phoenix, AZ), the Horizon Learning Center (Phoenix, AZ), and several schools in Austin (TX) helped with the field-testing of classroom and physical education materials prior to final program development. All approved

of the approach, and the Arizona schools have successfully implemented the Wellness Week approach.

From the programs described earlier, from information obtained in surveys conducted prior to developing the Wellness Week concept, from the findings of research, and from *Fitness for Life* program guides (<http://www.fitnessforlife.org/elem-materials>), several general organizational steps have been outlined to help those interested in developing a program.

Organizational Steps

Solicit Administrative Support. Teachers and other school personnel have many demands on their time. Having the support of the school administrators, especially the school principal, is critical.

Select a Wellness Coordinator. If there is a physical educator in the school, he or she is likely to be the coordinator. However, a committed parent, classroom teacher, specialist teacher, or



Photo Courtesy of Santa Clara Elementary School, Tucson, AZ

Special school-wide events promote activity and nutrition during Wellness Week.



administrator can also serve in this capacity—especially if provided with a guidebook.

Have a Clear Program Plan. Whether you use preprepared program materials, such as those on which the Wellness Week concept is based, or materials that you develop yourself, they must be available in advance. They must be easy to use and well organized. Teachers will not buy into a program unless they can see specific details.

Begin With Teacher Training and Orientation. Teachers indicate that they must feel secure in understanding exactly what they are to do if they are to adhere to this type of program. Training by a knowledgeable Wellness Coordinator or outside expert is essential. Training should include information about the benefits of physical activity (brain breaks) for academic success.

Clearly Outline Individual Responsibilities.

- Physical educator: Teaches special Wellness Week physical education lessons including introducing students to classroom activities to ease the burden on classroom teachers. Serves as Wellness Coordinator. Posts signs in school building and multipurpose room. Encourages activity on the playground.

- Classroom teachers: Conduct morning and afternoon exercise breaks. Morning breaks include 5–10 minutes of activity followed by a discussion of exercise and nutrition concepts. Afternoon activities (5–10 minutes) include activities that promote learning in other academic areas such as math, language arts, and science (see Lambdin et al., 2010, for examples). Teachers also post signs, distribute newsletters to parents, and participate in total-school activities.

- Cafeteria staff: Have special nutritious meals on Eat Well Wednesday. Post signs in cafeteria. Involve parents.

- Specialists: Focus on activity and nutrition with art projects, music activities, and library books on related topics.

- Administrative staff: Print and post school signs. Distribute newsletters. Encourage active playgrounds. Participate in Eat Well Wednesday, Get Fit Friday (TEAM Time), and parent night activities.

Inform and Recruit Parents. Provide an orientation about the program at a parent–teacher meeting before beginning the first Wellness Week. Use newsletters to inform parents. Ask parents to participate in nutrition events at school and evening activities associated with Wellness Weeks. As Mitchell and Aenchbacher (2012) noted, having a well-defined purpose for parent–evening activities and communicating it to parents is important. Parents can also serve on School Health Advisor Councils. Fifty-one percent of SHACs in Pima County had parent representatives.

Involve the Community. Invite community members (e.g., health agencies, community leaders) to serve on SHACs. Invite community experts to participate in Wellness Week events. The Institute of Medicine recommends that schools designate

individuals or committees specifically responsible for physical activity–related opportunities and programs (IOM, 2013, p. 8-5).

Recognize Participation. Non–physical educators may see Wellness Week activities as “extra” to their regular duties. So involving the local press and recognizing teachers and volunteers at parent–teacher meetings can go a long way toward promoting continued program success. As time passes, participation tends to diminish among teachers less dedicated to program objectives. So recognition and encouragement from the WC and school principal is helpful.

Protect Program Resources. Once program resources are identified or developed, they must be protected. Specifically, if guides for teachers, lesson plans, signs, and other materials are developed, they



Photo Courtesy of Santa Clara Elementary School, Tucson, AZ

Doorway decorations and signs promote activity and nutrition.

should be kept in folders that stay with the classroom/school (rather than the teacher) so that they are available for use in future years.

Volume Control. Volume control is a concept that *Fitness for Life* author Guy Le Masurier has applied to the Wellness Week model (Le Masurier, Lambdin, & Reeves, 2013). A television has a volume control—low to high—and programs can also. Programs can be implemented at a more limited extent (low volume) or a greater extent (higher volume). Some schools may choose to begin with a low-volume program and gradually add more aspects to the program until high volume is reached.

Summary

Wellness Weeks are designed to get schools started with a total school approach to healthy lifestyle promotion and are consistent with the goals of programs such as *Let's Move!* Active Schools and the whole-of-school approach to physical activity advocated by the IOM. Of high priority is the promotion of physical activity and sound nutrition in the schools. The health benefits of regular physical activity and sound nutrition cannot be disputed. The lack of physical activity and poor nutrition are second only to tobacco use as a cause of early death in our society (Mokdad et al., 2004). Because virtually all young people go to school, schools are a priority location for promoting exercise and nutrition.

Research supports the value of the Wellness Weeks approach, and guidelines from successful programs provide direction for schools interested in program implementation. Important considerations for successful programs include administrative, teacher, student, and parental support, strong program leadership, and sound educational materials. The Wellness Weeks approach offers each school the flexibility necessary to build a program in its own unique way.

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To learn more about this topic, please refer to these AAHPERD resources at www.aahperd.org/shop: *Developing School Site Wellness Centers; 101 Tips for Teaching Nutrition Concepts in Physical Education*.