

CHANGING MIDDLE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS TO REDUCE OBESITY

Massachusetts students eat healthier, watch less television, and are more active

Public Health Problem

- Many Massachusetts middle school students are either overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.
- Students often don't meet recommended guidelines for physical activity and many spend three to six hours a day watching television.
- Very few middle school students eat recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables daily.
- Poor diet and being inactive and overweight can affect academic performance and contribute to early development of chronic disease such as diabetes.

Program

- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health and Blue Cross Blue Shield partnered to develop *Healthy Choices*, a nutrition and physical activity program for middle schools.
- Schools receiving a *Healthy Choices* grant are required to: (a) implement *Plant Health*, an evidence-based nutrition and physical activity curriculum aligned with the Massachusetts Department of Education Curriculum Framework; (b) implement the CDC School Health Index, a tool that helps schools improve nutrition and physical activity policies, (c) offer a before- or after-school program that provides opportunities for physical activity and hands-on nutrition education; and (d) promote the 5-2-1-0 message throughout the school (eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, watch no more than two hours of television, get at least one hour of physical activity every day and use no tobacco).
- *Healthy Choices* coordinators based in the Department of Public Health's regional offices provide training, resources and ongoing support to teams of parents, community members and school staff who plan the program for each school.

Impact

- Individual students in *Healthy Choices* schools report eating more fruits and vegetables, participating in more physical activity and watching less television every day - important steps for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.
- Over one hundred public middle schools provide the *Healthy Choices* program to more than 75,000 students with school changes such as adding healthier items to school lunches, improving the snacks and beverages in school vending machines, and implementing before- or after-school programs that increase opportunities for students to be active and to develop healthy eating habits.
- Tobacco messages were added in collaboration with the health department's tobacco program in ten pilot sites and will be evaluated as the program progresses.
- Program sustainability is enhanced through funds and training supplied by partners such as the Massachusetts Department of Education, by engaging decision-makers in schools as part of an advisory group, and by expanding to upper elementary grades.

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