



SECTION 1  
**Introduction**



## Introduction

Creating healthier schools requires the engagement and commitment of numerous stakeholders. This is especially true in underserved communities, where multiple challenges confront millions of children and families every day.

Recognizing parents as a largely untapped force for change in school wellness, Action for Healthy Kids has produced this ***Parents Advocating for School Wellness*** toolkit. MEE Productions, an organization widely regarded for its success in mobilizing parents in underserved communities, provided valuable content and technical assistance to the development of this resource.

The purpose of this toolkit? To help Action for Healthy Kids Teams and other school wellness advocates unlock the enormous potential of parents as change agents, to engage them as partners in support of healthier schools for their children.

### **Built on Research and Real-World Application**

We know that when parents are informed, mobilized and properly equipped, they can greatly influence school policies and practices. There are many examples of parents successfully engaging with schools, ranging from improving educational quality to expanding arts and athletics opportunities to, indeed, improving school wellness, among many other issues.

Parents ***in all communities***, including underserved environments, care very deeply about their children's health and well-being. In fact, recent Action for Healthy Kids research conducted by MEE Productions found that African American and Hispanic parents in underserved settings feel that local schools and parents have a joint responsibility to influence children's eating and physical activity attitudes and behaviors.

Further, and most importantly, parents are interested in serving as wellness advocates. Our research\* indicates, however, that parents are looking for more information and education about school wellness. They simply don't know enough about what's going on in their schools to take specific actions to influence the wellness of their children at school.

\*Qualitative research with African American and Hispanic parents of school-aged youth in underserved communities conducted for Action for Healthy Kids by MEE Productions in 2006-2007.



# PARENTS ADVOCATING FOR SCHOOL WELLNESS



## Introduction (continued)

“To effect improvements in school wellness, we must involve parents as partners in the process. This parent advocacy toolkit helps Action for Healthy Kids Teams and other school wellness advocates to bring parents – especially in low-income, underserved communities – into the process of creating healthier schools, for the good of their children’s health and achievement.”

*David Satcher, MD, PhD, Former U.S. Surgeon General and Founding Chair of Action for Healthy Kids*

This knowledge gap also was evident in a nationwide poll conducted by Action for Healthy Kids, showing that parents from all areas of the country are unaware of local wellness policies. Many also wrongly assume that schools are providing adequate nutrition and quality physical opportunities to students every day. (See “Parents’ Views on School Wellness Practices” at [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org)).

## Toolkit Objectives

This ***Parents Advocating for School Wellness*** toolkit will help school wellness advocates close this knowledge gap among parents. The kit also provides carefully designed tools to help motivate and assist parents – particularly parents and other caring adults in low-income, minority communities – to move beyond awareness and caring to hands-on advocacy. This kit will help users:

- Further understand how to cultivate parents as school wellness advocates; how to connect with them and communicate effectively.
- Recruit parent advocates through community organizations and schools as well as by hosting a community informational event.
- Train parents on the importance of good nutrition and physical activity.
- Provide specific suggestions for how parents can work effectively with schools to promote wellness, drawn from the successes of Action for Healthy Kids Teams.
- Connect with community partners and schools.

With the help of this toolkit, parents and other caring adults in underserved communities can become better informed about the importance of school wellness and motivated to promote school wellness in their local school and community. The end goal: mobilizing parent-community networks to make positive contributions to the health of students and schools.



## Toolkit Components

The resources listed below were developed to assist Action for Healthy Kids Teams and other school wellness advocates to reach parents and other caring adults in low-income, minority communities, mobilizing and equipping them to effectively partner with schools to improve nutrition and physical activity opportunities.

### **Tools for program organizers and trainers:**

#### **Creating a Sense of Grassroots Urgency about the Health of Our Children**

“Real world” insights into engaging parents in school wellness advocacy as well as the hurdles to overcome. Realistic approaches to reach, teach and motivate parents and other caring adults about the connections between their children’s health, school wellness efforts and the overall success of their family and community.

#### **Recruiting Parent Advocates**

Low-cost methods for establishing a meaningful presence at the grassroots level and to gain the trust of community members, including recommended outreach techniques: e-mails, faxes, mailings and especially word of mouth, perhaps the most effective form of communication.

#### **Understanding Oral Communications**

Insights into effectively communicating with African American and Hispanic families, such as their cultural preference for face-to-face interaction between the communicator and his or her audiences.

#### **Tips for Promoting Community Events and Information Sessions**

Tips for planning and conducting community meetings and smaller, informal information sessions – including advice on potential partners, selecting a meeting location, who to recruit as a facilitator, setting an appealing agenda, establishing the right discussion tone and format, planning promotions and publicity.

#### **Parent Advocacy Incentives**

Listing of 15 possible incentives identified from research with African American and Hispanic parents that could increase parent participation. Ideas range from providing child care while they attend school events to gift certificates and healthy cooking classes.

#### **Outreach Poster** [Template for Local Customization]

Poster for displaying in community and provider settings with a “health advocacy message” that creates awareness and generates action and involvement.



# PARENTS ADVOCATING FOR SCHOOL WELLNESS



## Toolkit Components (continued)

**The Importance of Good Nutrition and Physical Activity for Children, Youth and Families** [PowerPoint Presentation; available separately at [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).]

Background information on why nutrition and physical activity are vital to children’s health, well-being and ability to learn – and the role families can play in supporting healthy habits at home and at school.

### Handouts for parent advocates:

#### How Parents Can Support School Wellness

Proven strategies and insights for parents on effectively partnering with schools to make much-needed wellness changes. Many of these suggestions come directly from the experiences of Action for Healthy Kids Teams as well as Partner organizations.

#### School Wellness Flyer and Local Advocacy Resources

 [Template for Local Customization]

Two-sided flyer with general advocacy information about school wellness on one side and contact information for local organizations and programs that address family health and school wellness issues, as well as grassroots advocacy organizations that might support organizing, networking and possibly provide funding opportunities. Adapt with local information.

#### Informational Brochure for Local Residents

 [Template for Local Customization]

Brochure for generating community awareness and generate involvement and action among parents, including an advocacy message, local school wellness standards, health tips for parents and tips for effective parental advocacy. Adapt with local information.

#### More School Wellness Resources

Listing of valuable school wellness tools, information and resources with links.



[www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org)



[www.meeproductions.com](http://www.meeproductions.com)

#### About Action for Healthy Kids

Action for Healthy Kids is a national grassroots partnership created to address the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on changes at school. Action for Healthy Kids is a public-private partnership of more than 60 national organizations and government agencies representing education, health, fitness and nutrition, which supports the efforts of its Teams (including all states and the District of Columbia) made up of over 9,000 volunteers. Action for Healthy Kids was created in response to *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, which identified the school environment as one of five key sites of change. The 16th U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher, is the founding chair of Action for Healthy Kids.

#### About MEE Productions

MEE is an internationally recognized communications firm that develops socially responsible, research-based communication strategies targeting urban and ethnic populations of all ages. The organization is based in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. MEE has more than a decade of experience in designing effective messages for often-marginalized and underserved populations.