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How Well Are Parents Contributing to the Health of Their Children's Schools?

New project seeks ways to involve more parents and measure their impact on helping schools, children be healthier

Chicago, IL (Oct. 13, 2009) – Parents can play a critical role in helping schools become healthier places and helping their children be healthier. Action for Healthy Kids, a leading national non-profit organization working with schools to help kids learn to eat right and be active every day, is expanding a program to get more parents involved in making schools – and their children – healthier and to measure the impact. The project, *Parents CATCH onto Wellness*, is a 3-year project funded in part by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation.

Parents CATCH onto Wellness will extend and accelerate the success of CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health), a program that helps schools implement a portion of the 'coordinated school health' model. A coordinated school health program recognizes that schools alone cannot solve children's health and social problems, and brings together important community members – families, health care workers, media, religious institutions and local youth-serving organizations – to meet the needs of children, including education about health, nutrition and physical fitness, among other issues.

Although CATCH has been implemented in elementary schools since the 1990s, schools still struggle to involve parents, a vast and virtually untapped resource. Recognizing this opportunity, *Parents CATCH onto Wellness* will recruit and train parents to be key players in the comprehensive school health model, measure the impact of their involvement, and identify and promote best practices for leveraging their help.

“As a parent myself, it has been encouraging to see more people become aware of the importance of school wellness, and for parents to care about improving their own schools’ practices, such as offering more nutritious foods and more opportunities for kids to be physically active,” says Rob Bisceglie, executive director of Action for Healthy Kids. “And, as a parent, I also know that we often don’t know how to get involved, and that educators sometime don’t know how to best engage busy parents. I think that we – parents, teachers, community members – can all do better for our kids.”

"Research has shown that participation in the CATCH program successfully slows the epidemic increase in childhood obesity rates. We believe that parents play a critical role, with schools, in helping us reduce childhood obesity and improve our children's health and fitness," said Aliya Hussaini, M.D., MPH, Grant Officer, US Health at the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. "We advocate the need for childhood obesity prevention strategies to intervene at all levels of a child's environment, including at the individual level, within families, within schools, and in the community and our work with Action for Healthy Kids is an important part of learning effective ways of involving parents in the struggle against childhood obesity."

A 2008 Action for Healthy Kids national survey indicated that most parents feel their schools could do a better job offering more opportunities for physical activity (80%) and more nutritious, appealing meals (82%), and that nearly all parents (96%) thought that parental involvement was important for improving these areas. However, only 1 in 4 parents had ever contacted their child's school to let them know of these concerns or to get involved.

Parents CATCH onto Wellness is made possible through a three-year \$300,000 grant to Action for Healthy Kids from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation. In addition to actively increasing parental involvement through training and materials, the grant will allow Action for Healthy Kids to scientifically evaluate the effectiveness of their parent outreach models and resources such as *Parents are the Power* and *Parents Advocating for School Wellness* (available at www.ActionforHealthyKids.org/addressing-the-issue/family-corner/), used by Action for Healthy Kids nationwide. The evaluation study will be conducted with researchers at the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Advancement of Healthy Living at the University of Texas, and will include parent surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews. The research will provide key insights about how best to engage and involve parents to help all schools improve nutrition and physical activity, and help children become healthier.

About Action for Healthy Kids

Action for Healthy Kids® (www.ActionforHealthyKids.org) is the nation's leading nonprofit and largest volunteer network fighting childhood obesity and undernourishment by working with schools to improve nutrition and physical activity to help our kids learn to eat right, be active every day, and be ready to learn. We provide expertise, volunteers, programs and resources nationwide through a unique collaboration of thousands of professionals, parents, educators, community volunteers and students, in partnership with more than 65 professional associations, government agencies and corporations.

About the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation

The Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (www.msdf.org) is dedicated to improving the lives of children living in urban poverty around the world. With offices in Austin, TX, New Delhi, India, and Cape Town, South Africa, the Dell family foundation funds programs that foster high-quality public education and childhood health, and improve the economic stability of families living in poverty. The foundation has committed more than \$530 million to global children's issues and community initiatives to date.

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