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Are Schools Making Our Kids Healthier?

Chicago, IL, August 5, 2008 -- Action for Healthy Kids, a national non-profit group that addresses childhood obesity, today released a special report warning that schools still need improvements to the quality of the foods they serve and the amount of physical activity opportunities they offer American children. The report also outlines a significant obstacle: most school administrators feel that their schools already *do* provide quality foods and adequate physical activity for students.

Action for Healthy Kids' report, *Progress or Promises: What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools*, comes two years after schools were federally mandated to implement 'wellness policies' that would improve nutrition at school and provide more opportunities for students to be physically active. Although most schools have adopted policies and made some changes for the better, the report underscores the need for broader, systemic changes made difficult by competing priorities, major budget shortfalls, and logistical obstacles.

"There are indications that progress is being made, however much more is needed", says David Satcher, MD, PhD, 16th U.S. Surgeon General, founding chair of Action for Healthy Kids, and Director of the Satcher Health Leadership Institute at Morehouse School of Medicine. "The report finds that the majority of parents have an interest in wanting schools to improve nutrition and physical activity opportunities, although less than 1 in 4 parents have contacted their school's principal or child's teacher."

In a survey commissioned by Action for Healthy Kids, just 18% of parents thought schools were doing a good job offering nutritious, appealing foods, and only 20% thought schools offer enough physical activity. Nearly all (96%) thought that parents play an important role advocating for better nutrition and more physical activity and P.E., yet just 24% had ever contacted their child's school to request improvements.

"In the area of nutrition, schools have made changes that are somewhat easier to address, such as improving the types of snacks they sell in vending machines," says Rob Bisceglie, Executive Director of Action for Healthy Kids. "But changing from fried to baked chips isn't enough. Schools need to offer nutritious, appealing, high quality foods and beverages that kids will actually eat – whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and low-fat dairy products. These further-reaching changes are more difficult to implement."

School decision-makers disagree

Progress or Promises: What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools reveals startling gaps in the perception of how well schools are doing in making health-improving advances -- gaps that must be bridged in order for progress to continue. For example, the vast majority of school administrators

(superintendents, board members and principals) and school foodservice professionals believe that their schools are already doing a good job limiting ‘junk foods’ and offering healthy, youth-appelling food options. Parents don’t share this optimism – 82% think that schools need to work harder in these areas.

Nearly 80% of physical education teachers and parents feel that schools need to provide more physical education. However, about half of school administrators think that schools already do provide enough quality daily physical education for all students.

Schools assign physical activity a lower priority

Studies have shown that active children perform better at school, even when time for physical activity has been taken away from instructional time. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that children engage in at least 60 minutes of age-appropriate physical activity most days of the week. However, 1 of 3 elementary schools does not offer daily recess, and just 4% offer daily P.E classes. Physical education actually declines as students go through school.

Schools do not assign a high enough priority to increasing children’s physical activity. Action for Healthy Kids reports that most local school wellness policies that they examined did not include goals for physical education or P.E. teacher training.

“Schools need to raise physical activity to a higher priority,” says Judith Young, PhD, vice president for programs at the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance and Chair of Action for Healthy Kids. “Kids don’t all need to become athletes, but they have to understand the things they should do to stay healthy. Schools need to recognize their influence when it comes to teaching healthy habits that will last a lifetime, and must rise to this responsibility.”

About *Progress or Promises: What’s Working For and Against Healthy Schools*

Action for Healthy Kids’ report, *Progress or Promises: What’s Working For and Against Healthy Schools*, is a summary of the status of efforts to improve nutrition and physical activity in schools.

The report is a compilation of one-on-one interviews with experts in the fields of public health, nutrition, education and child health; survey responses from more than 2,000 parents, teachers, administrators, school foodservice professionals and community health experts; and summarized data from recently published articles reporting on national surveillance studies and school wellness practices.

The full report and Executive Summary are available at www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

About Action for Healthy Kids

Action for Healthy Kids® is a national nonprofit organization that addresses the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on improving nutrition and physical activity policies and practices in schools. This grassroots public-private partnership of 60 organizations and government agencies supports the efforts of Teams – comprised of more than 10,000 volunteers – in all states and the District of Columbia.

Action for Healthy Kids was founded in 2002 by former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, 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. To learn more, visit www.ActionForHealthyKids.org.

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