What is Project Healthy Schools?

Project Healthy Schools is a middle-school based program designed to reduce childhood obesity and improve the current and future health of Michigan’s youth. Participants make significant improvements in health behaviors and health risk factors. This evidence based program encourages healthy habits through education, environmental change and measurement.

**Education**
- Hands-on health education lessons
- Family engagement activities with each lesson
- Bulletin board displays promoting wellness
- Learning enhancement through classroom physical activity breaks
- Online lessons and resources
- Professional development for educators

**Environment**
- School-wide wellness activities before, during and after school
- Promotion of healthier food and beverage options
- Additional opportunities for daily physical activity
- School wellness policy review
- Communication with staff and families
- Farm-to-school and garden programs
- Staff wellness initiatives
- Formation of a school wellness team
- Identification of a school wellness champion
- Improved culture of wellness

**Measurement**
- School wellness assessments
- Healthy eating assessments
- Pre-/post-program health behavior questionnaires
- Program satisfaction surveys
- Optional pre-/post-program health screenings
- Other quality assessment tools

Project Healthy Schools’ five simple goals:

1. Eat more fruits and vegetables
2. Choose less sugary foods and beverages
3. Eat less fast and fatty foods
4. Be physically active every day
5. Spend less entertainment time in front of a screen
Childhood obesity: why we started Project Healthy Schools

Since 1970, childhood obesity rates nearly quadrupled for children two to nineteen years old. Today, about 13.7 million children and adolescents are obese. Up to 60 percent of obese children have at least one cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factor, such as elevated total cholesterol, triglycerides, insulin, or blood pressure, and 25 percent have two or more CVD risk factors. Obesity also increases the risk for type 2 diabetes, cancer, kidney disease, and many other chronic conditions.

Without intervention, about 90 percent of these youth are on track to become obese adults. In addition to the health risks, obesity is a financial burden to the nation’s already compromised resources. Annually, $219 billion of the United States healthcare costs are attributed to heart disease, $147 billion to obesity, and $117 billion to physical inactivity. Childhood obesity alone contributes to $14 billion in direct medical costs.

With alarming statistics about the dramatic rise of childhood obesity over the last four decades, experts agree that individuals and the communities in which they live must work together to end this destructive, yet preventable, disease.

Project Healthy Schools’ mission is to bring the rich resources, experience, and expertise of each local community and the University of Michigan together to create a model school-based program that supports healthy children and families. The program targets middle-school students when they are at an age of increasing autonomy. This is the perfect time to give them the information and practice they need to make healthy choices that lead to healthy habits across a lifetime.

Since Project Healthy Schools began in 2004, more than 140 schools have implemented this sustainable program. More than 88,500 students and their teachers have benefitted from the program to date, and Project Healthy Schools continues to expand throughout Michigan.

We have been tracking data from the beginning to help give us concrete evidence of the medical and behavioral benefits of the program. Project Healthy Schools research published in the December 2015 issue of the American Journal of Public Health shows that students’ cardiovascular risk factors improved after participating in the program, compared to when they began the program. These benefits were sustained over four years. Additionally, despite worse baseline measures compared to students from high-income communities, students from low-income communities showed similar and sustained behavioral and physiological improvements after the interventions provided by the Project Healthy Schools program.

Reaping what we sow: measuring our success

Changes in Physiological Measures over Four Years: Sixth-Grade Baseline to Ninth-Grade

The graph above shows that students participating in Project Healthy Schools make lasting health improvements.
Partnering for success

Project Healthy Schools attracts collaborators from across the university, region and state

Building Healthy Communities
Since 2013, Project Healthy Schools (PHS) has added 94 new schools with support from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services through the Building Healthy Communities partnership. This private-public partnership is designed to fight obesity and improve childhood wellness through school-based programming.

Seed to Fork and Farm to School
In partnership with local farmers and nearby community garden organizations, Project Healthy Schools provides opportunities for students to plant, tend, harvest and cook food from their local school or community garden. In the spring and fall, seasonal local produce is offered in school lunches.

Food and Nutrition Partnerships
Project Healthy Schools partners with school food service vendors and others to provide supplies for the Rainbow of Color Salad lesson and wellness initiatives such as healthy cooking demonstrations, food tastings and cooking classes. For example, the Michigan Apple Committee provides apples for apple tasting events.

Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs
Through school-based and community partnerships, PHS strives to provide before, during, and after-school programs for students to be physically active for 60 minutes per day. Examples of physical activity programs that PHS funding and support can provide include: classroom-based physical activity breaks, structured lunchtime recess zones, before/after school open gyms and bike education programs. Through participation in such programs, students’ build healthy bones and muscles, improve muscular strength and endurance, reduce the risk for developing chronic disease risk factors, improve self-esteem, and reduce stress and anxiety.

University Collaborations
Students from the U-M Schools of Nursing, Public Health and other U-M programs get real-world experience by teaching Project Healthy Schools lessons and helping with program implementation. Project Healthy Schools also partnered with the U-M’s Department of Nephrology to develop and pilot a kidney education module, U-M’s School of Kinesiology to develop and pilot a classroom-based physical activity break intervention, and U-M’s Medical School to create educational opportunities on Infectious Disease and COVID-19.

Five steps to success
During the first year, a Project Healthy Schools team member trains the school wellness champion to take over support of the program and provides access to the PHS Portal, a password protected website with all the program materials. The PHS Portal also provides wellness champions with a forum for networking with other schools and it walks them through a five-step implementation process. Milestones guide the wellness champions in their efforts to create and sustain a healthy school environment.

Step 1—Build support: Identify a wellness champion and form a school wellness team.

Step 2—Assess school wellness culture: Complete the Healthy Schools Action Tools, and administer the pre-program Health Behavior Questionnaire.

Step 3—Make an action plan: Identify wellness goals based on assessment results, explore resources and create a School Wellness Improvement Plan.

Step 4—Take action: Teach the 10 Project Healthy Schools lessons, hold school-wide wellness initiatives and engage the school community.

Step 5—Measure success: Administer the post-program Health Behavior Questionnaire, complete the post-program surveys, and share both photos and success stories.
Executive Officers of Michigan Medicine: Marschall S. Runge, M.D., executive vice president for medical affairs, dean, University of Michigan Medical School, CEO Michigan Medicine; David C. Miller, M.D., president, UMHS, and executive vice dean for clinical affairs, University of Michigan Medical School; Patricia D. Hurn, Ph.D., dean, School of Nursing.

The Regents of the University of Michigan: Jordan B. Acker, Michael J. Behm, Mark J. Bernstein, Paul W. Brown, Sarah Hubbard, Denise Ilitch, Ron Weiser, Katherine E. White, Mark S. Schlissel, ex officio.


A word from our founder

Through these reports, we have seen consistent, positive modifications in student behaviors. What’s exciting for me is that these changes manifest in the measurements that we take of their physiology: reductions in blood pressure; reductions in LDL cholesterol, which is the part of the cholesterol profile that’s most dangerous in terms of later heart disease; modest reductions in blood sugar; and, when we measure their step test we’ve seen improvements in their fitness level. So, what the students are reporting in their health behavior surveys is matching up with what we measure, and that suggests that this program is beneficial and the impact seems to be sustained, which is exciting.

Studies have clearly shown that students who have healthier nutrition and more physical activity perform better in the classroom. They are establishing behaviors now that may last their lifetime. We want to help these kids be the most successful kids they can be, and I’m very proud that the University of Michigan has been such a big force in helping us make this happen.

Studies have clearly shown that students who have healthier nutrition and more physical activity perform better in the classroom.

We decided early on with Project Healthy Schools that middle school would be the target age group for this program. We spoke with some sociologists and others about when we should target these kids, and we decided that the moment when they break from grade school and move into the middle school, when they’re beginning to adopt both adult physicality and adult behaviors would be the right time.

We have been measuring the benefits of Project Healthy Schools from the very beginning through physical data and behavior questionnaires given to over 25,700 sixth graders as of fall 2020.

Stay connected to Project Healthy Schools

Sign up for our triannual newsletter at: bit.ly/PHS_newsletter

Visit us online at: projecthealthyschools.org

Join the project: help fight childhood obesity

Since 2004, Project Healthy Schools has helped students lower their cholesterol and increase healthy behaviors through education and environmental change, both at school and at home.

With your help, Project Healthy Schools can reach even more students, especially in high risk areas where obesity is most prevalent and where programs and resources are scarce. Private support from our donor community helps bring PHS to the communities that have the greatest need.

Your tax-deductible contribution to Project Healthy Schools will help us sustain our current efforts and expand our program into more schools to reach more children. Together, we can improve the health of the next generation.

To donate, go to our website projecthealthyschools.org and click on the “Donate” button, or mail your contribution to Project Healthy Schools, 3003 S. State St., Wolverine Tower 2060, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1281.