

# Classroom Connections (Student Health)

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## PROMOTE HEALTH TO ENHANCE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Physical and mental health play important roles in academic achievement. Can you list health promotion efforts that are happening in your classroom or school to enhance achievement? This issue of *Classroom Connections* offers some suggestions.

### Feed Them

Students from schools piloting a breakfast program lost less time to behavior problems, had increased attention spans, and a 40 to 50 percent decline in discipline referrals. School breakfast programs do not benefit only low-income children. The 1992 School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study conducted by the USDA found that 12 percent of students ate no breakfast at all. Our brains need fuel to operate, but many children consume foods that have negative health consequences. In general, snack on small amounts of foods that are low in fat and sugar or other sweeteners, such as fig bars, ginger snaps, raisins, or other dried fruit, pretzels, carrots, fresh fruit, and skim milk to provide a nutritious boost in addition to a healthy lunch during the school day. There are no magic foods, but well-nourished children do better.

### Water Them

Recent research tells us that the brain requires hydration to function well. Do your students carry a water bottle or have access to a water fountain often? A general rule of thumb is one cup per hour for optimal functioning. An interesting aside—increased water consumption has resulted in increased use of bathroom facilities by students and staff. The increase in traffic has dramatically reduced vandalism, loitering, and harassment in school bathrooms.

### Soft Drink Alert

Between 1977-78 and 1994-96, fluid milk consumption dropped by 33 percent among boys and girls 12-19 years old. In the same period, the proportion of individuals of all ages who drank carbonated soft drinks increased by 52 percent. As a result

- Adolescents ages 12-17 get, on average, 15 teaspoons of sugar per day from carbonated beverages, fruit-flavored, part-juice, and sports drinks.
- Milk and juice are among the top sources of vitamins A, C, B, calcium, magnesium, and phosphorus for children in the U.S. The typical 12-ounce, non-diet soda provides approximately 150 calories, nine teaspoons of sugar, and no minerals or vitamins.
- Only 18 percent of girls ages 9-19 consume enough calcium. Available data indicate that girls are able to absorb the most calcium near the onset of puberty, and then this capability declines for the rest of their lives.



### Facilitate Sleep

Make sure students and parents know that adolescents need a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night. Some researchers believe that 9 hours, 23 minutes is optimal for peak performance the next day. Adequate sleep allows for longer periods of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, consolidation of previous learning, and deep refreshment, all of which make one mentally sharper. You might also structure a minute or two of peaceful reflection time. Such time stimulates creativity and helps students to be more relaxed.

### Teach and Model Healthy Stress Management

Some stress is positive and propels higher performance. But stress can be overwhelming and debilitating. Be sure your students have a number of different stress management techniques in their repertoire. Positive self-talk (“I know I can do this!”), avoiding being rushed, talking about hopes and fears, thinking about long-term goals, exercise, and humor are a few healthy ways to relieve stress. Ask the health teacher in your building about stress management techniques used in the health curriculum, and reinforce this learning throughout the year.

### Remind Them to Breathe

One of the very best stress relievers is taking deep breaths. It is important for optimal learning because the brain requires oxygen to think clearly. Breathing in through the nose and out of the mouth through slightly pursed lips increases oxygenation and clear-headedness. Taking a stretch break and a few deep breaths is helpful! Doing a few slow toe touches or arm circles along with deep breathing gets oxygen to the brain and picks up the energy in a class. This works well as a transition to another part of a lesson or at the end of a class.

### Encourage Them To Exercise

Physical activity has so many positive side effects: it releases endorphins and serotonin and other “feel good” hormones in the brain; it calms and redirects nervous energy; it relieves muscle tension; it results in a state of related alertness which has been touted as the optimal state for learning and performance. Encourage your children to spend a minimum of 15 to 20 minutes a day in active physical exercise of some kind. Aerobic is best. Walking is fine. Just get them moving!

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Adapted from J. G. Sowers, Sowers Associates, One Park Avenue, Hampton, NH 03842 © 2000.



## OTHER RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

The following publications and articles can provide other ideas and help with adolescent health issues. All materials and resources can be acquired through National Middle School Association. For more information and additional publications, call 1-800-528-NMSA.

*Healthy Teens: Facing the Challenges of Young Lives.* By Alice R. McCarthy. Published by Bridge Communications, Inc. © 2000. Distributed through NMSA.

*Health is Academic: A guide to Coordinated School Health Programs.* Edited by Eva Marx and Susan Fredrick Wooley, with Daphne Northrup. Published by Teachers College Press ©1998. Distributed by NMSA.

"Teaching Prevention by Infusing Health Education into Advisory Programs." By Susan Maclaury. In May 2000 *Middle School Journal*, pp. 51-56. Published by NMSA.

"Healthy Choice: Urban Nutrition Initiative Gives Students a Recipe for Good Eating." By Tamara Dubowitz and Danny Gerber. In August 1999 *Middle Ground*, pp. 36-38. Published by NMSA.

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