School Wellness: Moving Toward Action to Prevent Childhood Obesity in Rural Communities

Perspectives from Extension Field Faculty

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OVERVIEW

Childhood overweight and obesity is a significant issue facing communities throughout the nation. Obesity in children is associated with increased risk of chronic diseases and mental health issues, as well as poor academic performance. Research suggests that youth living in rural communities have higher rates of obesity and overweight than their urban counterparts.

Generating Rural Options for Weight Healthy Kids and Communities (GROW HKC) is a research project being conducted in six rural communities across Oregon. GROW utilizes a community-based participatory approach to research, identify, and change factors that contribute to obesity in elementary-aged children. This research examines three realms of influence (family, school, and community) to better understand the physical, situational, and policy factors that contribute to obesity in rural youth.

FORMING A COMMITTEE

Collected data was subsequently organized into reports and presented to school stakeholders. Stakeholders were invited to build collaborative and broadly represented School Wellness Committees to address issues revealed by the assessments. Each School Wellness Committee then mobilized to find solutions and change their school’s physical, situational, and policy environments based on the assessments and other research-based strategies provided by GROW, including:

- Grants and start up funds
- Resource Guides for Best Practices
- Balanced Energy Physical Activity (BEPA) Toolkits

Action for Wellness

School Wellness Committees continue to meet regularly to make data-informed decisions and take action to generate lasting solutions for their schools. Collaborative and lasting solutions driven by GROW assessments and research-based strategies include, but are not limited to the following:

- School Gardens
- Facilitated Recess
- Fitness Trails

Re-Assessment

Throughout the duration of the study, the GROW team works with school stakeholders to implement the same research-based assessment tools. The results continue to assist School Wellness Committees in making informed and responsive decisions for the well-being of their elementary school through environmental change. Re-assessments also support the School Wellness Committees to measure, track, and celebrate improvements to the school environment.

Challenge & Success

Each school’s capacity to take action varied in the three counties and each GROW team faced a diversity of challenges. Team members confronted these challenges with the following strategies for success:

- Successful Strategy
  - School Gardens, Facilitated Recess, Balanced Energy Physical Activity (BEPA), and Nutrition Education: This strategy is based on the premise that lasting change occurs when the school and community are involved in identifying the barriers to healthy living and take part in carrying out the proposed solutions. This project is also based on the sociocultural model for changes in health behaviors.
  - Generation of Rural Options for Weight Healthy Kids and Communities (GROW): This research project is built on the premise that school-environmental assessments and research tools are needed to identify barriers to healthy living and to take part in carrying out proposed solutions. This project is also based on the premise that lasting change occurs when the school and community are involved in identifying the barriers to healthy living and take part in carrying out the proposed solutions.

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For more information on GROW Healthy Kids & Communities please contact GrowHKC@oregonstate.edu or at 541-737-4542.