



Healthy Kids

Mrs. Obama asks schools to help get kids active.

SCHOLASTIC
Instructor

By Caralee Adams

After the bell rings at Wilkinson Elementary School in Williston, North Dakota, students head to the gym to jump-start their day with a little "Y.M.C.A." or Achy Breaky Heart." The upbeat music is cranked and kids take turns leading the dancing and stretching. The 15-minute pump-up session wraps up with the Pledge of Allegiance. What's happening at Wilkinson Elementary is at the heart of Michelle Obama's new Let's Move campaign. Let's Move encourages kids to be active and eat smart in an effort to overcome childhood obesity. Today, about one in three children ages 2-19 in the U.S. is overweight or obese. The initiative, launched in February, calls on schools to help solve the obesity challenge within a generation. By taking part, you'll help kids form healthy habits and reap the added benefit of more attentive students. Read on for fresh ideas to support the effort to get kids moving.

1. Walk the walk.

Walking is easy, simple, and can make a difference not only in students' health, but also in behavior and test scores, says Robert Sweetgall, president of [Creative Walking Inc.](#) in McCall, Idaho. Try a Start-the-School-Day-with-a-Walk program where kids and teachers walk together every day for 10 minutes. Or have everyone wear a pedometer to keep track of their steps through the school year. Set a goal of walking a certain number of miles and use a map to chart your progress. Feeling ambitious? Try to log a million footsteps in a year. "Walking is something that all adults and children can do together-and it's free," says Sweetgall. "America is preoccupied with food, and physical activity is on the back burner."

2. Get Creative with Rewards.

Steer away from using candy or food to show kids they've done a good job. Instead, offer pencils, stickers, or special privileges, such as picking the music for a dance or being the line leader. Pizza parties to reward kids who were making progress at Centreville Elementary School in Centreville, Virginia, left everyone feeling "sluggish," says Principal Dwayne Young. So, they switched to a program where the most-improved student each week gets to take a walk with the principal through the historical neighborhood around the school. "It's a chance to connect with kids and it's become very popular," says Young.

3. Avoid Linking Punishment to Physical Activity.

Don't force participation in physical activity or withhold it as part of punishment, says Allison Nihiser, health scientist in the division of adolescent and school health with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. Disciplining kids who act out by making them sit during recess deprives them of a needed physical outlet, just as requiring an extra lap around the track for bad behavior sends the wrong message. Physical activity actually improves behavior and should be promoted in school as a regular, enjoyable activity.

4. Curb Cupcakes.

Birthdays don't have to be all about treats. Instead of a food celebration, have the each student make a card for the birthday girl/boy or ask everyone to autograph a special birthday T-shirt. Interestingly, as schools set up healthy food policies, parents have been the big barrier to change, not wanting to be told they can't bring in cupcakes for their child's birthday, says Jessica Donze Black, national director of the Healthy Schools Program in Washington, D.C. The key is to bring the parents and students into the conversation at the beginning to help set a policy together. If the decision is to have food for birthdays, propose cutting back by celebrating all the month's birthdays at once.

5. Offer New, Healthy Foods.

During April, the cafeteria at North Dakota's Wilkinson Elementary gives kids a chance to taste new foods. For trying a free sample of kiwi, sweet potato fries, red peppers, or star fruit, students get a sticker. If they like it, they tell food service and it may be added to the lunch menu. It can spill over to home. "Kids drag their parents along after trying something new at school," says Principal Pam Lambert.

6. Take a Break-To Move.

Throughout the day, take physical activity breaks to energize your students. Every Friday at Quincy Elementary School in Boston, physical education teacher Pauline Yee puts the week's "JAMmin' Minute" in each teacher's mailbox. At any time, teachers can lead the class in five-minute exercise breaks. Classes track how often they do a JAMmin Minute, and once a month a Golden Sneaker Award is given to the winning class in each grade. (The trophy is made from size 14 sneakers spray-painted gold and mounted on a wooden block.) "It inspires the kids. Especially those who tend to be more active are focused and settled down once they get out their energy," says Yee.

7. Incorporate Physical Activity Into Your Lesson Plans.

"The concept that we have to be seated at a desk to learn is antiquated," says Black. "Our brains work better when there is blood flow." As you introduce a lesson, let students stand up, stretch, or walk around the classroom. Try the [Take 10! program](#), where kids do a range of activities, such as acting out a story as it's being read aloud. Or for ideas about integrating physical activity into academic concepts, go to a [site run by North Carolina educators](#). During math class at South Kilbourne Elementary School in Columbia, South Carolina, kids play "Run for the Money." In the gym, kids run to pick up discs across the gym with different increments of money written on each and do basic math problems. "They don't realize they are learning, they are having so much fun," says physical education teacher Kappy Price.

8. Give Healthy Homework.

Set a class health goal for the week. Challenge kids at home to expand their palates and try a new fruit. Or encourage them to do some physical activity and report back. Add a little competition to make it fun and track their progress on a chart-providing an appropriate reward, such as the choice of game during P.E., suggests Black.

9. Weave Lessons About Nutrition Across Disciplines.

Seeing the increase rate in Type 2 diabetes and hypertension in elementary school students stunned Imogene Clarke, director of student nutrition services at Richland District One in Columbia, South Carolina. "We may outlive this generation of children unless we turn this tide of obesity," says Clarke. So she helped champion the removal of unhealthy foods from schools and encouraged teachers to incorporate messages about nutrition into all subjects. They talk about nutrition in science, make bar graphs of favorite vegetables in math, learn about the culture of various foods, and write poetry about fruit. "It makes children more aware and they are taking the information home," notes Clarke.

10. Go Outside.

Think of ways you can take your class outside to learn. Plant a garden and then chart the growth of your produce. Study shadows on a page. Do math problems with chalk on the playground. Take an environmental walk. Teachers at Centreville Elementary School are required to teach outdoors at least once a week. "We want kids to look at their own environment and be a part of it," says Principal Dwayne Young. "It gets them out and moving."

11. Raise Funds Without Food.

If you are the staff liaison with a school club, steer the group away from unhealthy food sales. There are other ways for the band to make money than to sell candy bars or for the German club to peddle gummy bears. Try selling wrapping paper or magazines or having a car wash.

12. Say Cheers to Water.

Let kids bring refillable water bottles to class. Research shows that it's a healthy way to stay hydrated and it saves all those trips to the water fountain. Worried about the mess? "Some teachers were afraid kids would spill it, but it almost never happens," says Young. It's a responsibility and a source of pride for kids to have their own water bottles-just like the grown-ups, he says. Some schools provide water bottles with the school's logo or a bottle holder to hook onto the student's desk.

13. Ask Kids to Keep a Food Log.

Post the food pyramid in your room and talk about a healthy eating plan. Have students use the scientific process to hypothesize whether they eat a balanced diet, and use the information that students collect to analyze diets for quality and for eating all of the recommended food groups, suggests Francesca Zavacky, senior program manager with the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. Here's an [easy-to-use form](#).

14. Fuel Up at Snack Time.

In Grand Forks Public Schools in North Dakota, if kids bring a snack it must be a fruit or vegetable. "The cool thing is that a fruit or vegetable is the perfect-size package," says Bev Benda, a licensed registered dietician who was a nutrition supervisor in Grand Forks as it piloted the new program. "A lot of kids were bringing in Pop-Tarts and eating 340 calories one hour before lunch. They weren't hungry." After the program was in place, kids started coming to lunch ravenous and eating better. Benda was called in to explain the policy to new parents at kindergarten "round-up," but after two years it wasn't necessary. "I got nothing but applause. It had become part of the culture," she says. Some schools sell snacks mid-morning from a set list of healthy foods, such as string cheese, raisins, or sunflower seeds.

15. Be a Role Model.

"When you spend six to eight hours a day with kids, there are lots of ways that teachers can do some positive modeling and reinforce healthy living," says Sarah Krieger, spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association and a registered dietician in St. Petersburg, Florida.

At snack time have kids bring something high-protein and low-fat to keep their energy level up. A cheese stick and apple, low-fat yogurt and a small handful of nuts or dried fruit are all good choices, says Krieger. Talk about "everyday foods" and "sometimes food," avoiding labels of good and bad.

Seize the time during breaks or lunch to get some exercise yourself. Squeeze in a walk or pop into your school's weight room to lift or do exercises. Tell your kids about how good you feel after working out to inspire them.

Consider being a part of a school wellness program. At South Jefferson Elementary School in Jefferson County, West Virginia, physical education teacher Chris Atkins leads an exercise class in the gym twice a week after school, and once a month he organizes an activity, such as white-water rafting or paintball, for staff and their families. He gave pedometers to all 50 staff members and split them into teams to compete for walking the most this year. Atkins also offered to measure the staff's BMI at the beginning of the year and help them work on lowering it throughout the year.

The steps you take to improve your own overall health may send the most powerful message of all to students. We're in this together!