Georgians Gather to Share Best Practices

Childhood obesity and overweight is a growing concern throughout the United States. The epidemic levels of obesity pose a significant threat to the health of Georgia’s youth. In reaction to the increase in childhood obesity, Policy Leadership for Active Youth (PLAY) has worked over the past 5 years to connect the emerging evidence based research around physical activity and healthy eating to policies and practices in Georgia. As part of that effort, PLAY hosted a conference in summer 2008 that focused on the importance of identifying and disseminating best practices around physical activity and nutrition. Over 130 professionals from schools, public health and healthcare, after-school programs, childcare centers, and other community-based organizations gathered in Macon, Georgia for the conference, *Addressing Overweight: Model Nutrition Practices for Children and Families*. The conference served as a springboard to document best practices and programs with high potential in reducing the overweight epidemic in Georgia. This brief is a summary of the key points from the PLAY summit held in summer 2008.

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Sharing best practices is vitally important to promoting effective health and nutrition practices. A recent Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, “Progress in Preventing Childhood Obesity: How Do We Measure Up?” shows that a substantial gap exists in the opportunity for local agencies and organizations to implement overweight prevention activities and programs and their capacity to evaluate them (pg 39). Consistent with IOM recommendations, the statewide conference served as a tool for sharing information and promoting emerging research and effective model practices. The World Health Organization suggests that knowledge integration through the sharing of information leads to “actionable knowledge” that better equips organizations to create, organize, and implement successful public health programs. Experts recognize the importance of best practice sharing as a social process that has the potential to breed new ideas and solutions which can be utilized across structural levels. Information sharing of this kind has proven to be important for public health. In Georgia, PLAY supports such efforts as a means of addressing the childhood obesity epidemic.

**Focus on Prevention**

Over the past four years, there has been an increased focus on childhood obesity prevention in Georgia and throughout the nation. State agencies, non-profit organizations, educational institutions, and health advocates around the state are all responding to the call to increase physical activity and healthy eating for Georgia’s children. There has been a marked emphasis by practitioners and health advocates on health programs and policies across multiple sectors including schools, families, communities, and health care. Georgia has witnessed an increased programmatic focus across
sectors that have potential for reducing childhood overweight.

The Importance of Collaboration

Expert speakers at the conference stressed that action to reduce childhood overweight and obesity must take place at the state, local, and community levels. Stakeholders from government, businesses, schools, health care organizations, and families must commit to changing the social norms that have so largely contributed to the obesity epidemic. A multi-sectoral, long term and adequately supported population-based approach is vital to successfully addressing obesity.

Break-out session: Schools

Since children spend the majority of their time at school, the schools are a logical place to begin addressing the childhood overweight problem. Schools are beginning to realize that they have a significant role to play in promoting physical activity and healthy eating behaviors. In 2004, Congress mandated wellness policies for all school districts, which increased awareness about the relationship between health and success in schools. Schools across Georgia are now engaging in efforts to promote wellness. In Thomas County, Georgia, the school district created The Buzz, a newsletter put out by the school nutrition staff. Because of the 2004 mandate, they have a new commitment to wellness and have created individualized school improvement plans for every school in the district. With a supportive superintendent and a proactive wellness committee, the district has added nurses in every school and has a new commitment to physical education at all levels.

HealthMPowers, a non-profit organization aimed at helping students make healthy choices, offers a three-year intervention program to participating schools. Their three-pronged approach provides services for students, school staff, and parents. In 2007, they partnered with Ridgeview Middle School in Sandy Springs, Georgia to promote increased physical activity and health. Through classroom sessions, newsletters, DVDs, and other educational activities, Ridgeview Middle School made healthy changes that are benefiting all students. More information about HealthMPowers can be found online at www.healthmpowers.org

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Break-out session: Community/After-school

After-school and community programs have proven to be effective environments for targeting childhood overweight. These environments can easily offer programs for healthy changes in eating and physical activity behaviors through collaboration with school nutritionists, local camps, YMCAs and other community venues. Three local YMCAs in northwest Georgia obtained support for an afterschool program through the philanthropic community. The partnerships with the community make learning about healthy eating and physical activity fun by supplying schools with pedometers; offering trivia, tips, announcements; having fruits and veggies of the month for the school food programs; and by providing classroom fiestas that include a tasting of healthy foods for kids. After-school cooking clubs have been piloted in 3 schools to provide hands on experience for children on how to cook healthy meals. The clubs also train high school students on the

5-a-day program to teach younger children in daycare and after school programs about healthy eating behaviors.

YMCA’s Youth Fit for Life is a 12-week progressive program focused on behavior change and increasing physical activity. The program intends for children to spend 45 minutes exercising and strength training and is tailored to the age and fitness level of the child. In addition, the program uses a workbook that can be shared with parents to increase family awareness and involve them in nutrition and physical activity with their children. The nutrition component of Youth Fit for Life is offered in conjunction with Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta and has been successful by focusing on building relationships with the children participating in the program. Other innovative programs such as Tiger Tracks at Washington-Wilkes Elementary School in rural northeast Georgia offers physical activity homework for extra credit. The program engages parents by having them sign off on the exercise homework for the child. Effective community and after-school programs often involve parents and/or family members in learning about healthy eating and physical activity alongside their children.

Break-out session: Healthcare/Clinicians

Clinicians from the Georgia chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics focused on the importance of addressing childhood obesity with families. Since most children see a physician regularly, pediatricians are an excellent source of counseling for parents and youth on nutrition and physical activity. Presenters provided recommendations for physicians to consider: discuss nutrition and physical activity at every well-child visit, discuss the psychological and social issues related to food, focus on the importance of breastfeeding, urge
parents to model appropriate eating behaviors for their children, and encourage making grocery lists of healthy foods before going shopping.\(^4\) Since clinicians have such a short amount of time to spend with patients, each physician must decide whether to focus on wellness, psychosocial, or behavioral patterns. This decision should be tailored to the needs of each patient and family.

Healthy behaviors can be encouraged at the local level. In the Valdosta area, a 2004 community task force collected information on childhood obesity in schools and developed policies to promote access to physical activity and fruits and vegetables. In the 10-county area, participating schools evaluated their wellness policies through the CDC’s School Health Index\(^5\) and then received funds to improve their wellness. With the grant funding they received, schools were able to buy equipment for physical activity, integrate point of decision prompts in the lunchrooms, post nutritional information on meals in the cafeteria, offer dance classes, publish nutrition newsletters, offer nutrition family nights at the schools, and create a healthy snack program after school. Local health officials and clinicians alike can impact childhood overweight through collaboration of key stakeholders (families, schools, etc.).

**Break-out session: Early Care**

Eating and physical activity behaviors practiced during the childhood years influence overall health during the late adolescence and adulthood. The early care setting is important for sharing model nutrition practices with children and families. Programs should aim to promote lifelong changes in lifestyle for both parents and children. Recommendations for children in the early care setting include drinking more water and less sugary beverages, eating more fruits and vegetables, increasing physical activity, and building self-esteem.\(^6\)

Children’s Health Care of Atlanta (CHOA) sponsors several programs for overweight children and their families. The *Take Charge of Your Family’s Health* program features one-on-one consultations focused on “stress-free feeding”. Parents are taught to plan and provide healthy foods while children are taught how to make healthy food choices. Children and parents receive workbooks and learn about healthy eating and feeding environments. *Fit Kids* offers another means for children and parents to connect at CHOA. The six-week program aims to increase physical activity among participants, teach families about healthful eating behaviors and environments, and decrease screen time for participants. Children and parents receive workbooks so that the materials can be revisited and implemented in the home. Early care interventions like these are vital to reducing the childhood obesity epidemic and positively affecting their health as adults as well.

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**A Call to Action!**

The PLAY conference affirmed the importance of programmatic and policy efforts across multiple settings. It highlighted the need to identify and foster partnerships as vital to the development of successful and sustainable programs in various settings, including school, after-school, community, early care, and healthcare. Child health and well-being are common interests that have the potential to serve as a catalyst for collaborative relationships among individuals and organizations at the community, local, and state levels. Establishing model programs across Georgia will require leadership from stakeholder. Additional emphasis by communities, schools, clinicians, public health organizations, and other agencies on childhood overweight prevention activities will improve the health and quality of life for Georgia’s youth and help to ensure a promising future for our state. The model programs shared at the PLAY conference and in this brief are examples of programmatic successes that have significant potential to benefit youth in communities across Georgia.

For additional information about the model programs featured in this policy brief, visit [http://publichealth.gsu.edu/PLAY/1712.html](http://publichealth.gsu.edu/PLAY/1712.html)
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