



## NJDOE News

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### **Back to School 2003 *Healthy Choices, Healthy Kids* Campaign is Core of DOE's Commitment to Boost Health and Physical Education Programs in Schools**

This year the Department of Education is escalating its commitment to a health and fitness campaign for New Jersey's schoolchildren. An interdepartmental campaign, entitled *Healthy Choices, Healthy Kids*, was kicked off last spring at the Healthy Kids Summit. *Healthy Choices, Healthy Kids* combines several different initiatives and programs into one collaborative project.

"The Department of Education, along with the other participating departments, is very excited about the new school year, as we prepare to launch new projects and programs to revamp the state of health and physical education in the New Jersey school community," said Commissioner of Education William L. Librera.

"This year we will have revised core curriculum content standards in comprehensive health and physical education, and will provide multi-media tools to aid local educators, pilot programs of health education teacher training and collect information on student body mass index," Commissioner Librera said. "All of these activities predict that 2003-2004 will see more attention focused on health and physical education in NJ's schools."

The DOE's initiative had its beginnings well before the May summit. The campaign has grown out of the national concern about the rising obesity problem among youth, due in part to the effects of the largely sedentary free-time activities pursued by the nation's young people.

As the new school year unfolds, school administrators will be receiving materials several years in the making that will help them to revise their health and physical education programs. The DOE is also moving forward in its work on teaching tools and new curriculum standards for health educators.

"Schools have enormous potential for helping students develop the knowledge and skills they need to be healthy and to achieve academically," said Assistant Commissioner of Education Richard Ten Eyck. "We have the power to change our own behavior and in the bargain, improve our own health and fitness, as well as our children and grandchildren."

The campaign has been funded by a \$96,000 grant provided to the NJDOE in 2001 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to support a youth media campaign to encourage increased physical activity and healthier eating choices. The money has been used to develop youth media messages that are being distributed in various forms to school districts. "We were able to do more with the money than anticipated," said Linda Morse, acting manager of curriculum and instruction for the DOE's Office of Academic and Professional Standards.

Booklets and interactive CD-Rom's are being sent to all K-8 principals in September, with the recommendation that the material be shared with leading physical education staff in each school, as well as community parents and organizations. The CD-Rom's contain downloadable clips from the *Fitness for Life* video, while the booklets document consensus reached by the focus groups at the Be Fit! Forums.

The information and conclusions published in the media materials were researched during the 2001-2002 school year, through the Be Fit! Forums, from November to April. These forums incorporated over 100 school districts and were held at four sites around the state. Each participating school sent out a team of four, consisting of one male and one female student, as well as a teacher or school official, and a parent or community coach.

Focus groups were held to discuss issues within the school environment that affect children's physical well-being, from physical education program quality to school lunches. Students from the five state colleges that prepare healthy and physical education teachers ran the focus groups. Within the groups, participants conferred about the quality of health and physical education in their particular schools across the state.

*Fitness for Life* is a nine-minute video developed by the DOE in collaboration with the New Jersey Council on

Physical Fitness and Sports and the New Jersey Network. The video displays dynamic physical education classes in four different school communities: Paterson, Ridgewood, Mount Laurel and West Deptford. It raises the questions of highest concern that instigated the campaign, as well as showcasing innovative examples of high-quality physical education.

Among these issues are the alarming nationwide statistics reported in the video: 4 million kids have above normal blood pressure; 5-10 million kids are obese; 27 million kids have high cholesterol. Every day 3,000 kids under 18 become daily smokers.

Contrasted with these statistics are clips from progressive physical education classes, where students are generally having a great time while exercising. "I want to be a dancer," explains one wiggling, energetic young girl.

"There is a profound body of empirical literature that says healthy, active children have the potential for increased school success," insists JoAnne Owens-Nauslar, director of Professional Development for the American School Health Association and an expert quoted in the video.

Last spring, the *Healthy Kids Summit* fused the various efforts into one public campaign involving the Governor's Office, the Department of Education, and the departments of Agriculture and Health and Senior Services.

"The effects of obesity and poor health on learning are of extreme concern to educators," said Richard Ten Eyck, who cited a well-documented connection between physical well-being and improved academic performance.

The Department is planning to implement several other programs this year, including the new Core Curriculum Content Standards for Health and Physical Education, as well as a pair of new pilot programs related to student fitness.

"We anticipate approval of the new Core Curriculum Content Standards by November," said Linda Morse. "They are pending adoption by the State Board of Education."

The standards will create more effective and updated ways for health and physical education to be taught and studied in New Jersey schools. The department has an important role in working with districts as they adapt to the new standards.

The DOE is also collaborating with the Department of Health and Senior Services in an introductory pilot program that will collect information on the height and weight of children to calculate body mass. A representative group of 30-35 schools will participate in the program, with school nurses taking anonymous data from sixth-grade classes.

"We plan to see how cumbersome the data collection process is, as well as whether there are discrepancies in the process," explained Morse. "We will then evaluate how useful the data are to us in targeting problem areas."

The DOE recently joined the Health Education Assessment Program of the State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS-HEAP), to which approximately two dozen other states belong. The program is also a partnership with the Department of Health and Exercise Science at Rowan University, led by chair Dr. Richard Fopeano.

The program provides training in new assessment strategies and performance tests to state teachers, in an effort to quickly realize the benefits of the new assessment methods in improving the health education curriculum.

Through this collaboration, a training program is scheduled for a pilot group of about 75-100 teachers for the summer of 2004. The teachers will learn how to use materials to assess students in the area of health education. As there is currently no statewide test for health education, these centralized training sessions will allow state officials to better gauge the health education programs of individual school districts, and thereby improve them.