

## Wisdom Learned from:

# The Role of Michigan Schools in Promoting Healthy Weight

### POSITIVE GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS WHO REQUEST HELP WITH WEIGHT REDUCTION

It is inappropriate for teachers to provide weight loss treatment. However, there are positive ways in which teachers can provide guidance to students who are concerned about their weight.

#### Readiness

Teachers should not offer weight-related suggestions to individual students unless the student asks for guidance. Lifestyle changes will not be possible until a child is emotionally ready to make the changes.

#### Goal of Intervention

If a student does approach a teacher for guidance with weight-related concerns, the following should be kept in mind:

- The goal of any weight-related intervention should be to identify lifestyle changes that will promote healthy eating and appropriate physical activity. Weight loss should never be the goal. National experts agree that the goal of weight treatment for growing children is to keep weight stable or to slow the rate of weight gain until a child's height "catches up" with his/her weight.
- If a student asks a teacher to help him/her lose weight, the teacher could make a neutral comment such as, "It may be that your present weight is the one that is normal and healthy for you. I'm not sure you need to lose weight. But I can help you look at the choices you are making about food and exercise to find out whether there are healthier ones you could be making."

#### Recommended Topics for Discussion

If a student has asked for guidance with weight, the following topics of discussion are recommended:

- **Realistic body image.**  
Promote positive body image and body satisfaction, reassuring students of their personal worth regardless of their size or shape. Help students revise body image goals when such goals are based on unrealistic ideas of normal size and shape. Help adolescents identify the changes in their bodies that are a normal part of puberty. Body fat usually increases temporarily for boys in early puberty, then they become leaner as they approach their peak height spurt. Girls normally have a persistent increase in fatty tissue throughout their adolescence, but they also experience a weight gain six to nine months before the peak in their growth spurt. Many boys get transient breast tissue development in early puberty and girls get fat deposition in their hips and thighs causing them to feel 'fat' for the first time and to blame themselves. Temporary increase in body fat before major growth spurts is a normal process.

- **Nutrition problem solving.**

Teachers can help a student identify eating habits that do not support good health, such as overuse of high-fat fast foods or soft drinks. Identify foods of minimal nutritional value that could be eliminated without making the student feel hungry or deprived. Identify situations where students are most likely to eat less nutritious foods (movie theaters, while watching TV, etc.), and help them plan strategies to make different choices. Be alert to the possibility that students who feel desperate to lose weight may be using unsafe dieting practices like going without food for extended periods, vomiting, using laxatives, or following fad diets. Stress the importance of not skipping meals and getting the right kinds of foods to stay healthy.

- **Problem solving for physical activity.**

Help the student identify physical activities that are genuine sources of fun and ways to incorporate such activities into the week. Identify current daily patterns to see where the student believes that physical activities could be substituted for sedentary activities. Help the student voluntarily set a limit on television or computer time. Encourage the student to make a change or learn a skill that will result in regular activity such as taking up intramural sports, joining a bicycling club, taking a dancing class, etc.

- **Social support.**

Help the student identify friends who will participate with him or her in new healthier eating and physical activities. Additionally, identify individuals who will provide moral support and encouragement such as a counselor, teacher, friend, or parent.

- **Coping skills.**

Help the student identify non-confrontational or humorous responses that they can use when faced with rude teasing and criticism related to weight (e.g., "I didn't know you cared." or "If you were a friend of mine, you would not be saying such mean things.") If a teacher learns that a student is being subjected to systematic abuse or bullying because of weight, it is appropriate for the teacher to take action to stop the behavior.

- **Documenting success.**

Help the student identify measures of success in his or her healthy weight efforts using criteria other than weight loss. For example, the student could keep a log that tracks the number of hours he/she watched television, number of minutes walked, hours of computer time, servings of low-fat milk or yogurt eaten, servings of fruits and vegetables eaten, healthy snacks that were substituted for candy bars or potato chips, and/or the number of times the student chose to walk rather than ride in a car or bus. This log could be shared with the teacher on a weekly basis.