



Giving Kids the Voice of Authority: Engaging Students in the Fight Against Childhood Obesity

Action for Healthy Kids firmly believes that students are not simply capable of taking responsibility for developing and implementing healthy eating and physical activity solutions. Given the chance, they genuinely want to. The Massachusetts story told here demonstrates this, while reminding us of the practical and motivational importance of mini-grants; the crucial significance of giving kids high-quality informational tools with which to work; and the inestimable value of Action for Healthy Kid's practice, since its inception, of happily joining forces with like-minded organizations and making them part of the team. In the end, handing kids the reins and watching them clear the hurdles with youthful vigor and creativity is – in a real way – Action for Healthy Kid's ultimate definition of long-term success. It's precisely what happened in Massachusetts.

MEET THE "NEXT GENERATION" OF SCHOOL WELLNESS ADVOCATES

In Massachusetts Action for Healthy Kids' "Students Taking Charge" initiative, it wasn't just student council members from participating high schools who represented the "next generation." Student interns on both the college and secondary-school levels, and representing both public and parochial schools, were actively involved in overseeing and administering the project. They included:

Zachariah Baker
Tufts University

Merry Colella
Wellesley (Massachusetts) High School

Lani Skipper
The Boston Latin School

This is a story about the involvement of students themselves in the battle against childhood obesity – and how the Massachusetts Action for Healthy Kids Team learned that, at the high school level at least, student councils can be an important ally, and a major player.

In what turned out to be a remarkably successful attempt to engage students, the Massachusetts Action for Healthy Kids Team launched its "Students Taking Charge" initiative. The Team awarded grants of \$1,000 to each of six pilot high schools in Massachusetts in the fall of 2004. These grants were used to aid students in helping to develop, evaluate, and hone a "toolkit" about nutrition and physical activity in the school environment – and subsequently to help students assess their own school environments, plan for improvement, advocate for change, and implement a sustainable, policy-based action plan.

And it worked. The Massachusetts Team received a total of 25 applications from school districts across the state for the six available awards. Ultimately, a total of 45 students ended up working directly on the "Students Taking Charge" project, with more than 6,000 students directly impacted.

Finally, Students as Participants – Not Passive Beneficiaries

Vanessa Cavallaro, an Action for Healthy Kids Team member employed by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, was a key figure in "Students Taking Charge." *(continued on page 3)*

**A PROJECT PROFILE
IN STUDENTS' WORDS**

Boston's inner-city East Boston High School was one of the six Massachusetts high schools participating in the "Students Taking Charge" initiative. Here's a snapshot, in the words of the students themselves.

What is East Boston High School?

East Boston High School is a diverse urban high school located in East Boston, Massachusetts. The student population is about 49% Hispanic, 24% Caucasian, 24% African-American, 3% other.

**How did you hear about the initiative?
Why did you apply?**

Our group heard about the grant opportunity through an email that was sent to our student council advisor. We took on this project because of our deep commitment to a happier, healthier student body. With our help, we know our students can make positive changes for their health!

How many students worked on the project?

Approximately 10 students worked actively on the project, although the entire student council of approximately 30 members was consulted throughout the process.

**How many students did you survey?
What did you find?**

We surveyed approximately 350 students from grades 9-12. Through our survey we discovered that students at EBHS are satisfied with their nutrition options, but that their physical activity and access to health information is disappointingly low. We found that though lots of great programs exist at our high school to keep our students healthy, many students are unaware of the programs available to them.

What did you learn about your school from completing the toolkit's modules?

We discovered that due to budget and staffing limitations, only half the student body takes health or physical education each year. We also learned that there is not a system in place to effectively communicate to students their nutritional and physical activity needs.

What issues did you decide to focus on for your project and why?

We focused on improving the communication and dissemination of information related to nutrition and physical health at East Boston High School. We are developing what we feel are affordable, sustainable policies that our school can adopt to improve students' access to information regarding their nutritional and physical health.

This year, our school is planning for the restructuring of our high school into Small Learning Communities (SLCs). With our input during the planning phases, we hope that our policy suggestions will become an institutionalized part of our new school communities

What other steps are you taking?

In order to improve communication and dissemination of nutrition and physical activity information, we are:

- Implementing a student council run section of the school website.
- Revising the health curriculum to include speakers addressing nutrition and physical activity topics that reach out to the entire school community, not just those enrolled in health education.
- Establishing peer support groups to address issues related to physical health and nutrition as an institutionalized component of our school's new small learning communities.
- Holding a walk-a-thon in the fall where we will disseminate information about nutrition and physical activity and get students out and moving.

What do you plan to do next year with "Students Taking Charge"?

- Student council sponsors speaker on nutrition and physical health.
- Survey student body to determine interest in topics for subsequent speakers and peer advisory groups.
- Ongoing information for students via student council run website.
- Support groups in place based on students' expressed interests.

How will the policies you recommend be sustainable in years to come?

- Guidelines for the updating of the website written into the Student Council Charter.
- Meet with school restructuring committee to discuss how students' physical health and nutritional concerns can be met in our new SLCs.
- Work with Health Department leaders to write a provision into health curriculum to expand guest speakers to larger population.

In addition to East Boston High School, schools participating in "Students Taking Charge" initiative included:

- Minnechaug Regional High School, Wilbraham, Mass.
- Northampton High School, Northampton, Mass.
- Palmer High School, Palmer, Mass.
- West Boylston High School, West Boylston, Mass.
- Westport High School, Westport, Mass.

10 TIPS FOR GETTING STUDENTS INVOLVED IN SCHOOL WELLNESS INITIATIVES

1. Know how you want students to be involved on your project or initiative.
2. Locate and contact groups already involving students on this issue.
3. Personally ask students.
4. Consider involving a number of students for your team, not just one – kids work well within a group of their peers.
5. Seek support/approval from parents, advisers, principals and superintendents.
6. Recognize the students, school, and association for their involvement.
7. Give students ownership of specific tasks for your project or initiative.
8. Remember that while students are not nutrition or physical activity experts, they can play an important upfront role in public appearances.
9. Respect students' knowledge of target audience.
10. Consider special funding for youth involvement.

Prepared by Action for Healthy Kids' Partner Steering Committee members:

Rocco Marano

*Director, Division of Student Activities,
National Association of Student Councils,
National Association of Secondary School
Principals*

Sandy Spavone

*Director of Programs, Family, Career
and Community Leaders of America*

“Basically,” Cavallaro explains, “we decided to connect with student councils and student governments as a kind of ‘efficient entrée’ into the schools. As everyone knows, kids on student council tend to be the do-ers, and those are the kids we wanted. We presented them all with a draft of the toolkit, engaged them in reviewing the drafts and soliciting their input, and then showed them how the toolkit could be applied. Then we turned them loose. Almost incredibly, they all ended up doing just what we’d hoped – applying the knowledge gained via the toolkits to their own school environments.

“At the end of the process, we arranged for student leaders at all the pilot schools to have the opportunity to testify before the Massachusetts state legislature, presenting their own ideas and solutions for their schools to the public health community. It was really rewarding to see these students’ hard work and careful thought presented in that kind of forum.”

The opportunity to share their ideas on wellness, and wellness policy, with state leaders was, Cavallaro says, “a very big deal,” and was universally exciting for the students.

Equally exciting is that the nutrition and physical activity toolkit, along with various findings generated by the “Students Taking Charge” initiative, is now being readied for publication, for use by other Action for Healthy Kids Teams.

Meaningful, Impactful, School-Specific, Student-Developed Wellness Solutions

The Massachusetts Department of Education was instrumental in getting the call for applications out to student-government groups in high schools across Massachusetts – although Action for Healthy Kids Team member Cavallaro had worked closely with high school students in various capacities before.

“In choosing the six schools to which we would eventually award grants,” Cavallaro recalls, “it was important to us that we had good geographic distribution across the state – from urban schools in Boston, to suburban and rural schools mid-state.”

Post-grant, close contact with the six schools chosen, in terms of technical assistance and support, was vital. For that reason, Cavallaro and two Massachusetts Team members, Melissa Giamanco of the New England Dairy and Food Council and Elizabeth Walker of the Harvard Prevention Research Center (HPRC), each took two of the schools to oversee personally. The women were supported by a hard-working Tufts University student intern with an academic major in public health, Zachariah Baker, as well as by two other student interns.

“Any time you work on encouraging policy change,” Cavallaro notes, “you’re trying to institute things that are meaningful and sustainable, and to steer people toward efforts that change things long-term. That’s the primary reason I was so gratified by what the students in our initiative came up with. Whether it was instituting a salad bar, or adopting new cafeteria nutrition standards, or whatever, these were real-world solutions these kids came up with.”

“I was also, frankly, amazed at the skill level of these high-school

HELPING STUDENTS FIND THEIR VOICE

Remember, teaching students how to advocate involves showing them how to:

- Gather credible information.
- Make a case for change.
- Suggest policy changes.
- Implement policy changes.

Especially important:

- Always follow through.
- Recommend changes that are realistic.

THE “STUDENTS TAKING CHARGE” INITIATIVE IN A NUTSHELL

- Grants for \$1,000 given to six Massachusetts high schools.
- Urban, suburban, and rural schools involved.
- Grant work focused on evaluating the toolkit and implementing sustainable policy change.
- Connected students to state legislators.
- Students presented their ideas to public health community.
- Massachusetts Team members provided technical assistance to schools throughout the school year.

The Project...

- Adapted the planning section of the CDC School Health Index.
- Taught students how to make realistic choices.
- Encouraged students to list goals, find adult allies, and anticipate barriers to change.
- Showed students how to engage decision-makers, communicate ideas clearly with presentation and written summary, form workgroups, delegate responsibilities, ask for help when needed, and expect recognition.

students in presenting their ideas and conclusions in public settings – to Team members, in many cases to their local school committees and superintendents, and eventually to the state legislature. I’m not talking just about their speaking skills, but about their diplomacy and their preparedness. It was eye-opening.”

“The biggest reward, of course, is that our toolkit is now being brought online. It will be both downloadable and interactive, and will be a terrific mechanism for engaging students across the country in being advocates for change.”

Would Cavallaro do anything differently?

“I think one change I would make next time around is that I would probably make this a multi-year program. It takes time to pull off a team effort like this, and it would have been even more effective, and would have allowed us to involve even more students, if we’d had a two-year time-frame within which to execute it, rather than one year. A multi-year grant to participating high schools would be ideal.”

Cavallaro points out that the cooperative nature of the “Students Taking Charge” initiative is noteworthy.

“We’re trying to do things in Massachusetts that reach students in innovative ways, and that takes close cooperation among everyone – in this case the Massachusetts Team, HPRC, the Massachusetts Department of Education, the New England Dairy and Food Council, and of course the local student governments.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned, though, is how much policy change you can implement with very little money. A lot of work, yes – but very little money. That and the fact that it’s just plain fun working with high schoolers.”

Benefiting from the Honesty, Originality, and Innovation of Kids

The Harvard Prevention Research Center, located at Harvard University’s School of Public Health and a funding recipient of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), does a great deal of work and study in the area of child nutrition. The Massachusetts Team correctly viewed them as a valuable cooperative partner in their venture.

The toolkit was developed using the CDC School Health Index, and it was a significant evolution from existing advocacy tools developed specifically for students. The idea was to create a new, updated, more efficient “super tool” for student assessment of school Wellness Policies – one that would be geared to high school students in particular, an age group that is often strangely overlooked in the childhood obesity discussion.

“The toolkit was about way more than nutrition and physical activity,” says Massachusetts Team member Elizabeth Walker. “It was about helping kids be a catalyst for change. Just like other constituencies, such as parents, high school students have a powerful voice, and a lot of good ideas, to offer legislators. Kids come up with wonderful concepts and strategies when they’re given the chance. Students as a group are a source we simply don’t tap into enough in the public health field in general.”

Walker reminds us that the CDC’s School Health Index generally uses

STUDENT GROUPS IN ACTION: SAMPLE ADVOCACY AND PILOT PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

- Purchase salad bars for cafeterias.
- Create greater opportunities for physical activity through extra-curricular activities.
- Create programs to disseminate health education materials and engage peer support groups to address topics related to physical activity, nutrition, and eating disorders.
- Incorporate systematic student body input into future school health and physical activity and nutrition programs and policies.
- Improve vending items.

adults within schools to perform the assessments that are the School Health Index’s foundation. And she feels that putting assessments about nutrition and physical activity into students’ hands brings a somewhat more realistic picture.

“Students are, in my experience, far more honest about their immediate environments,” Walker says. “A lot of the assessment questions in the School Health Index, and in our toolkit assessment, are subjective – and kids have a wonderful frankness and matter-of-factness about things that adults tend to edit, or perhaps be more polite about. Is the food at school palatable? Are your nutrition and wellness courses teaching you anything? Are you really getting any physical activity at school, or is the school just paying lip-service to it? Students tend not to dissemble about these things, as adults sometimes do. Their honesty can give you an amazing sense of what’s really happening in the trenches.”

So what did Walker learn from the initiative?

“What the ‘Students Taking Charge’ initiative really showed me,” Walker continues, “is that students are very capable of stepping up to the plate and taking on this issue, and attacking it in concrete, innovative ways. What’s key, though, is that you’ve got to trust the students to actually take it on, and empower them to do so – not just pretend they’re in charge. You need to make it clear that you’re there to help them, but not to do it for them. With our toolkit, we had to make it clear that the responsibility for the assessment, and the resulting action plan, was theirs, not ours.”

It’s About Helping Students “Own” the Project

Most satisfying to Walker, and to Cavallaro, was the response of state legislators in Massachusetts, many of whom were all ears at the students’ findings, in a way they might not have been if the project had been commandeered only by adults.

Walker recalls, “At our ‘legislative breakfast,’ at which students presented,

ANOTHER USEFUL PARTICIPANT CONSTITUENCY: STUDENT INTERNS

NEWSFLASH: student interns at the college level can be important players in school wellness projects!

An example is the role played by **Zachariah (“Zach”) Baker** in Massachusetts’ “Students Taking Charge” initiative. Baker was a Tufts University student with an academic interest in child nutrition and physical activity who took on what turned out to be an invaluable administrative function in the project – shepherding the toolkit through numerous drafts and refinements; helping promote awareness of the project to schools and distributing applications; and even assisting in the selection process of the final six participating schools – all on a volunteer basis.

“ I had a longstanding interest in the whole subject of childhood obesity,” Zach points out, “having come from a family with a lot of rather serious weight issues. I had also had a summer job in southern California where I’d had the opportunity to work with a teacher within the Los Angeles Unified School District who was very committed to school-based wellness programs, and from whom I had learned a lot. So when I heard about the Massachusetts ‘Students Taking Charge’ program, being in college in the Boston area especially, I sent off an email and introduced myself and volunteered.”

How does Baker characterize his involvement?

“ It ended up being one of the most enlightening, and satisfying, things I’ve ever been involved in. Kids are incredibly sensitive about their peers’ suffering – and make no mistake, obese kids are suffering. I found it enormously gratifying to watch the Massachusetts students committing themselves to working on making their own and their peers’ lives better through better nutrition and more physical activity, and actually figuring out how to use the toolkit as a means to that end. I would highly recommend that other state projects bring local college level interns like myself to projects like this. Everybody wins.”

MASSACHUSETTS: THE INITIATIVE STEP-BY-STEP

How, exactly, did Massachusetts Team members go about their work on the “Students Taking Charge” project? Here’s a step-by-step walk-through of the initiative, which could be replicated by others.

STEP 1: Define the players.

A collaboration among national Action for Health Kids, the Massachusetts Action for Healthy Kids Team, Harvard Prevention Research Project, New England Dairy and Food Council, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, and the Massachusetts Department of Education.

STEP 2: Promote the project.

Schools throughout Massachusetts contacted as potential participants.

STEP 3: Accept applications.

Support and handholding assistance provided by Team members to schools during application process.

STEP 4: Review applications.

A total of six participating schools selected; mini-grants awarded.

STEP 5: Execute the project.

School wellness toolkits used and applied by schools’ student council groups in developing original concepts, ideas, and recommendations.

STEP 6: Oversee the work.

Three Team members closely monitored two schools each.

STEP 7: Present the results.

Recommendations made personally by students to Massachusetts state legislators in formal breakfast presentation.

STEP 8: Share the results and recommendations.

An online link to the toolkit and resulting student recommendations provided, for reference by other Teams and interested outsiders.

we had almost 200 people present – and if you know anything about state government, you know it’s next to impossible to get legislators to come to any event like this. It was the highest attendance they’d ever had at a ‘legislative breakfast.’ It was incredibly valuable for the kids who participated – but I like to think it was equally edifying for the lawmakers.”

Walker echoes Vanessa Cavallaro’s contention that the initiative would be even more successfully executed as a two-year program, the better to allow time to “get things going” and to “prove the sustainability” of the effort. And she feels that a two-year time-frame would allow for a valuable “reporting and follow-up period,” with additional evaluation and the writing of quarterly reports adding to and enriching the students’ experience of overseeing an initiative of this kind.

“Having the kids map the longer-term results with a project like this is an important way of keeping them, and the project itself, on-task. It contributes to the ongoing-ness of the project, and helps the kids ‘own’ the project even more.”

The concept of “ownership” is one Elizabeth Walker returns to frequently. She notes that she’s seen similar projects done in other states in which well-meaning administrators, faculty, or even adult volunteers play roles that sadly eclipse those of the students.

“I’ll concede that whenever you’re working with students in general, or with a student council group in particular,” Walker warns, “it helps to get the principal on board right at the beginning – to engage the relevant administrators, and keep them in the loop, so that, whatever the project becomes, the school will ‘build it into its infrastructure.’ But in the end the students have to be the prime movers for them to feel ownership of it. They’ve got to do the work, and take credit for the results. Their visibility is key in keeping them excited. It never ceases to amaze me what kids will deliver when you make these kinds of grownup demands of them.”

Walker tells the encouraging story of one student at East Boston High School, who had been a quiet, shy, retiring young man who never volunteered in class. Suddenly placed in charge of presenting his group’s nutrition and physical activity recommendations to Massachusetts legislators, however, he bloomed as an articulate, passionate, relaxed presenter and a naturally gifted, even humorous, speaker. His classmates and teachers were amazed at the transformation.

Self-confidence benefits like this aside, Walker notes that the CDC is planning an online link directly to the Massachusetts-developed toolkit, and deems their embracing of the Massachusetts students’ work most validating of all.

Realizing that Students are a Resource

Rocco Marano is an educator, administrator, and currently Director of the Division of Student Activities of the National Association of Student Councils, an organization overseen by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and a member of national Action for Healthy Kids’ Partner Steering Committee. Marano’s experience working with student groups is vast, and he has seen first-hand the benefits – both to projects

and to students themselves – of making students active participants in initiatives of all kinds.

“In so many instances,” he says, “we as adults want to help kids – but we tend to want to do things for them, not with them. In truth, we often don’t think their opinions matter very much – and yet we want them to buy into whatever it is we’re trying to sell them. Without doubt, the best way to get kids’ buy-in is to involve them. Solicit their thoughts. Ask them to identify the problems and to create solutions that make sense to them. It’s such an obvious thing to do – and the Massachusetts Team ‘Students Taking Charge’ initiative just illustrates that perfectly.”

Middle- and high-school students can often be shockingly well-informed, Marano points out, and have a tendency to come up with perspectives on projects that “adults wouldn’t have thought of in a million years.”

“Kids see things differently,” he states. “They have technology at their fingertips. And they’re inherently innovative. It’s amazing to me how often we fail to see them as a resource. And as you can imagine, I was particularly pleased to see the Massachusetts Team involve student councils specifically – since nutrition, health, exercise, and lifestyle issues are topics that student councils absolutely should be involved in. One of the stated missions, in fact, of the National Association of Student Councils is to ‘encourage and support healthy living styles for young people.’ So reaching out to student governments as a means of engaging students at large in the wellness issue couldn’t make more sense.”



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To learn more about
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ABOUT ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

Action for Healthy Kids is a national, non-profit organization addressing the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on changes at school. Action for Healthy Kids is a public-private partnership of more than 50 national organizations and government agencies representing education, health, fitness and nutrition, which support and accelerate the efforts of 51 Action for Healthy Kids Teams (including all states and the District of Columbia) made up of thousands of volunteers.

Former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher is the founding chair of Action For Healthy Kids, which was launched at the 2002 Healthy School Summit in Washington, D.C. Action For Healthy Kids was created in response to *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, which identified the school environment as one of five key sites of change.