

## Fighting the Obesity Epidemic: Collaborations to Improve the Health of Youth Through Physical Activity *West Virginia*

### Problem Overview

Overweight and obesity influenced by physical inactivity and poor diet are associated with an increased risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma, and arthritis. Overweight among U.S. children aged 6 to 11 has more than doubled in the past 20 years. Children and adolescents who are overweight are more likely to be overweight or obese as adults. About 30% of West Virginia's population is overweight, putting the state among the top three in the United States coping with this major health risk.

### Program Description

To address West Virginia's high rate of overweight among children, the state Coordinated School Health Program, supported by the CDC and Mountain State Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS), partnered to leverage funding to improve the health of children in the state. BCBS helped support a competitive grants process to fund physical activity and nutrition activities in elementary schools between 2004 and 2007. The project aimed to establish a solid foundation for good health habits that would extend into adolescence and adulthood. The program, "Challenge for Healthier Schools," required schools to submit a plan for programs on physical activity or nutrition education.

### Program Impact

Annual grants of up to \$5,000 were awarded to 13 elementary schools during the 3-year period, leveraging more than \$140,000. Accomplishments include:

- Building a trail to connect the school grounds to the Rails-to-Trails system, resulting in students using the Rails-to-Trails system during the school day for physical education, recess, and class outings.
- Purchasing in-line skates and safety equipment for physical education class.

Overall, more than 2,200 students were exposed to physical activity and nutrition education events during the project period. Process evaluation indicated that the events were successful and well received by both parents and youth.

Positive experiences with physical activity at a young age help lay the foundation for regular physical activity throughout life. Joint public and private efforts underscore the collective benefits that can be attained through innovative collaborations.

*Note: Success stories, including background data and outcomes, reflect information as reported by participating programs. Also, in this context, impact refers to short-term or intermediate outcomes.*

