

## Interventions and Strategies to Improve Health and Increase Academic Performance Among Groups Experiencing Health Disparities

### *Gadsden County, Florida*

#### Problem Overview

In the United States, some racial and ethnic populations suffer disproportionately from preventable diseases, many of which result from health-related behaviors established during childhood and adolescence. School programs that address risk behaviors among youth can help improve the health of populations at risk for these health disparities. Coordinated School Health Programs (CSHPs) are an effective way of accomplishing this goal. CSHPs focus on improving quality and increasing coordination, resulting in a planned, organized, and comprehensive set of courses, services, policies, and interventions that meet the health and safety needs of students in grades K–12.

#### Program Description

Beginning in 2005, the CDC-funded state CSHP provided resources and technical assistance to Gadsden County, Florida, to implement a districtwide CSHP. Gadsden County suffers disproportionately from health disparities and academic challenges.

To begin the project, the school district formed a planning and advisory committee, Gadsden County Wellness Approach to Community Health (G-WATCH). Next, every participating school was required to complete CDC's *School Health Index (SHI)* to identify its individual needs. G-WATCH used the results of the *SHI* assessments to develop a coordinated school health strategic plan that included 45 goals and emphasized nutrition education and physical activity. The state CSHP gave each of the participating schools \$2,000 yearly to maintain a Healthy School Team to implement activities consistent with the district strategic plan.

#### Program Impact

After 2 years of implementation, G-WATCH accomplishments include:

- Adopting a district policy that encourages physical fitness and discourages employing or withholding physical activity as punishment.
- Passing a district policy for a daily 15-minute recess for students in grades pre-K–5.
- Prohibiting sales of carbonated beverages during meal periods.
- Implementing meal schedules that comply with the Florida guideline of a 20-minute seated eating time.

Effective CSHPs can increase adoption of health-enhancing behaviors, improve student and staff health, and use resources more efficiently. In addition, research demonstrates that improving health increases academic performance. Therefore, widespread adoption of the CSHP model should help improve the health and academic performance of our nation's youth.

*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.*

