

Become a Champion for Healthy, Active Schools

By Charity L. Bryan,
Sandra K. Sims,
Donna L. Dunaway,
and Donna J. Hester

Quality nutrition, physical activity, and a high-quality physical education program greatly improve student academic achievement, on-task behavior, concentration, absenteeism, and adequate yearly progress (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model brings together health and education experts to collaborate on ways to improve children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. In addition, the WSCC model provides a framework to focus on the interdependent relationship between children's learning and their health (ASCD, 2014). Using this collaborative approach as a framework, the Alabama Champions for Healthy, Active Schools is one way to meet the components of the WSCC model.



The Alabama Champions for Healthy, Active Schools is a statewide wellness initiative for grades K–12 focused on academic success and healthy living. The Champions initiative is a collaborative effort involving key partners that share a vested interest in improving the health of Alabama students, families, and school personnel. It is supported by the Alabama Department of Education; Alabama Department of Public Health; Alabama State Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (ASAHPERD); Alliance for a Health-

ier Generation; and Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Alabama.

Advocacy efforts are needed across the country to promote healthy and active schools. Schools are a logical choice for these efforts, as students spend 2,000 hours a year in school, and schools provide a unique opportunity to teach and model healthy eating and active living habits. Champions assists school districts and schools with the development of successful policies that promote wellness.

Champion schools are schools that individually or as part of a local school system are driven by a working wellness policy, and other policies, in accordance with the United States Department of Agriculture (2017) requirements that promote nutritious meals and nutrition education; physical activity before, during and after school for all students; and staff and community involvement. Each school program is designed to be inclusive of every person in the school building, including individuals with disabilities. “Champion” schools are encouraged to commit to:

1. Providing 60 minutes of physical activity throughout the academic day by various means, including physical education for all students;
2. Providing nutritious meals, nutritious smart snacks, and alternate fundraisers to selling consumable foods for organizations such as parent-teacher associations, parent-teacher organizations, booster clubs, and so on; and
3. Engaging parents, staff and the community in the initiative (see Figure 1).

One way to provide children and adolescents with 60 minutes of physical activity throughout the school day is to maximize their activity time during physical education. A quality physical education program includes specific physical education policy and an environment in which all students can participate; a curriculum centered around the SHAPE America National Standards and Grade-Level Outcomes for K–12 Physical Education (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2014); appropriate instruction that takes into account all developmental levels; and student assessment that provides evidence of



Advocacy efforts are needed across the country to promote healthy and active schools. Schools are a logical choice for these efforts, as students spend 2,000 hours a year in school, and schools provide a unique opportunity to teach and model healthy eating and active living habits.

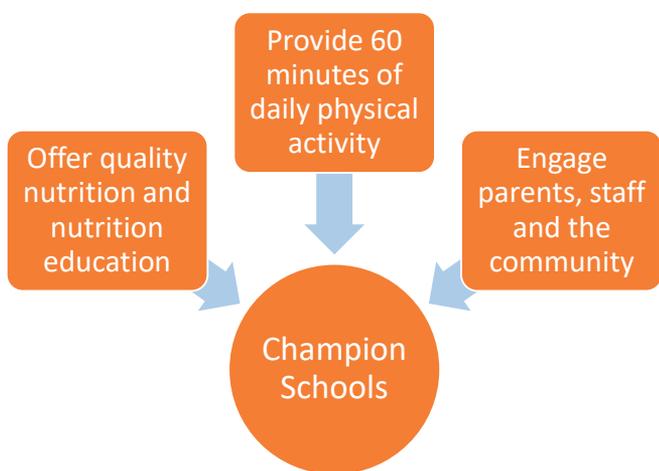


Figure 1. Characteristics of a Champion school

achievement and improvement (SHAPE America, 2015). Schools are also encouraged to integrate physical activity and wellness knowledge into the school day by including a healthy living tip or quote of the day as part of each morning’s announcements and by providing an activity calendar for the

entire family. Specifically, schools are encouraged to provide short (3–5-minute) physical activity breaks during long stretches of seated instruction; provide recess for elementary, or a break for secondary students in addition to physical education; and include students with disabilities. Champion schools believe that after 50–60 minutes of instruction, students should move! (see Figure 2.)

Physical activity opportunities before and after school are mainstays of the Champions initiative. Champion schools work with their communities to create safe opportunities for students to walk and bike to school (i.e., Safe Routes to School). In addition, these schools open and supervise physical activity facilities (e.g., gym, weight room and fitness center) for staff or student use before and after school. Physical activity clubs and intramural sports are also offered to encourage physical activity participation by students, including students with disabilities.

Champion schools also work collaboratively with nutrition services, classroom teachers, and administrators to provide nutritious breakfasts and lunches that comply with the Alabama State Department of Education guidelines regarding nutritious meals (National School Lunch and Breakfast Program); smart snack standards; fundraisers, better vending machine options, and break/snack times; plans for children with special nutritional needs; and an after-school snack program. In addition, Champion schools have the option to participate in the Fresh

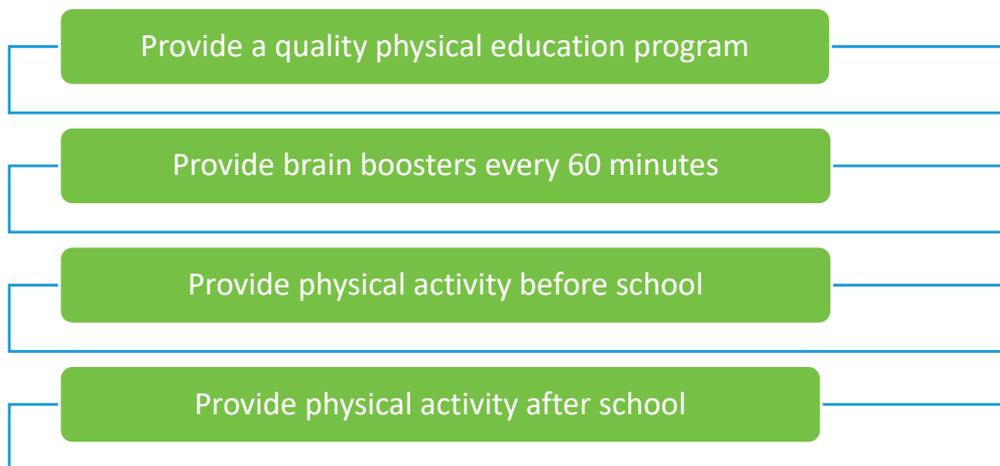


Figure 2. Champion schools provide 60 minutes of daily physical activity

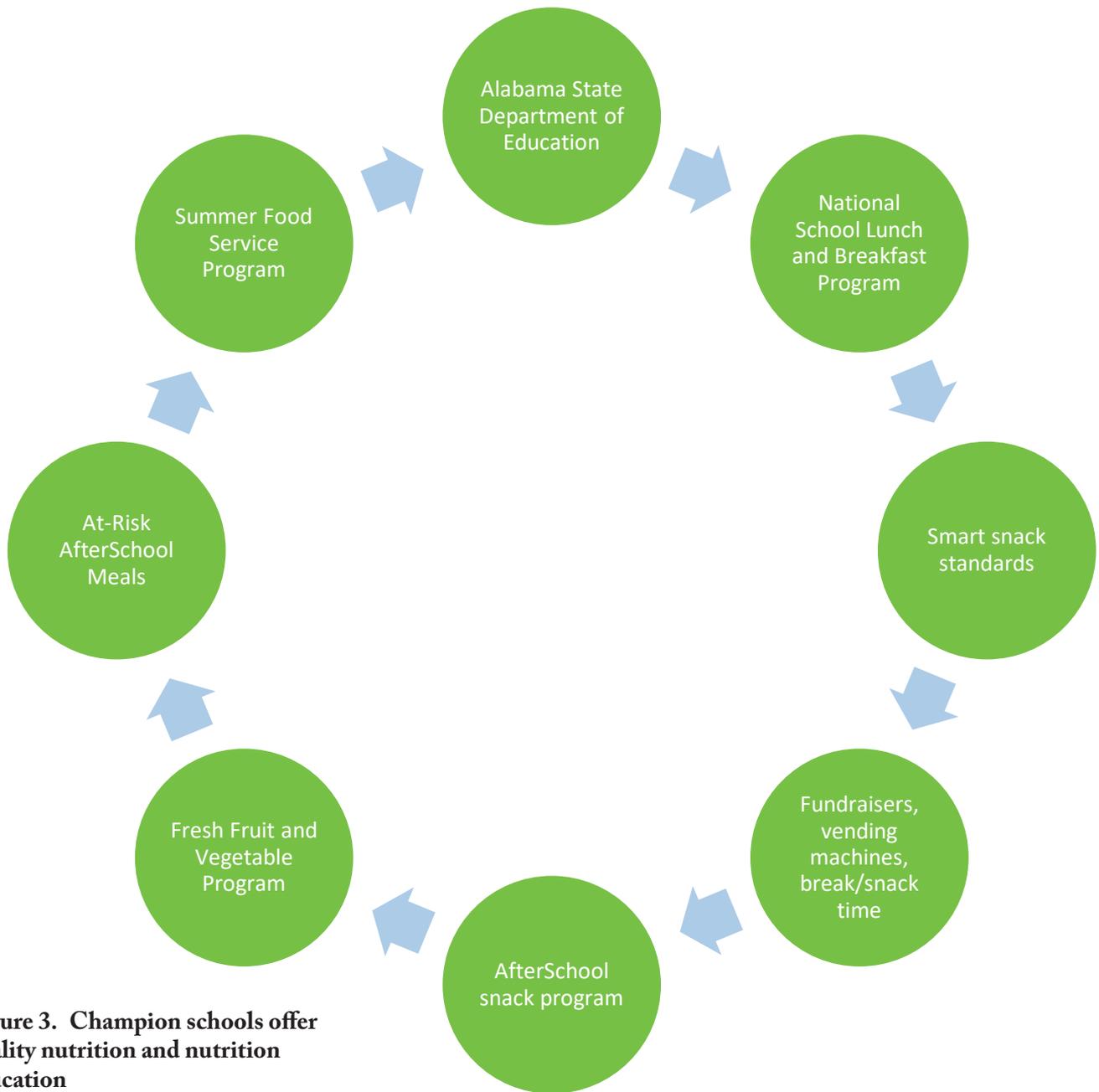


Figure 3. Champion schools offer quality nutrition and nutrition education

Fruit and Vegetable Program, the At-Risk AfterSchool Meals, and the Summer Food Service Program (see Figure 3). It is also recommended that schools conduct non-food fundraising events and consider having a school garden where vegetables are grown by students and prepared and served in the school cafeteria.

Champion schools should engage staff, families and communities in the initiative (Figure 4). In order to facilitate movement opportunities for students, staff are provided professional development on how to create opportunities for physical activity in the classroom. “Walk and talk” meetings are encouraged among colleagues, and a staff needs assessment can be conducted to determine staff needs and desires for a healthy,

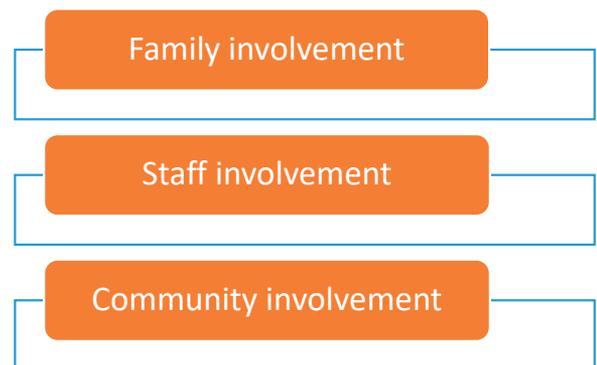


Figure 4. Champion schools engage parents, staff and communities

physically active work environment. Finally, staff are encouraged to participate in “Scale Back Alabama,” an initiative sponsored by the Alabama Hospital Association, Alabama Public Health, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama. The goal is to encourage Alabamians to get fit and work together to combat Alabama’s obesity levels.

Family and community involvement is an essential component of the Champion schools. One strategy is to include physical education and physical activity information on the school website and in school newsletters that are shared with parents. Parents are invited to special events such as Bring a Parent to PE Class, Family Fun Night, and health fairs. Community members may be invited to participate in events such as Fitness Night and school-sponsored 5K run/walks or fun run/walks. Part of the instructional process involves teaching students how to use community physical activity resources such as local recreation centers, bike paths, and hiking trails. Champion schools also provide accommodations and modifications of all activities for students, staff and parents who have disabilities.

Why Is the Champions Initiative So Important?

The goal of the Champions initiative is to ensure that every school provides a comprehensive school physical activity and nutrition education program with quality physical education as the foundation, so that youth will develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime. There is a plethora of evidence stating the benefits of exercise and the need to increase physical activity to attain these benefits. John Ratey (2015) stated that exercise is “Miracle-Gro for the brain.” In their revolutionary book, *Spark*, Ratey and Hagerman (2008) asserted that exercising before school helps to increase the release of the brain-derived neurotrophic factor, which supports learning and memory function, and increases new brain cell growth.

We also know that the physical activity cycle begins in early childhood and continues through both adolescence and

adulthood (Telama et al., 2005). Physically inactive children also miss two additional school days above the average, have lower test scores, have increased health-related expenses, and are twice as likely to be obese as adults. In addition, pre-schoolers with inactive parents are far less likely to be active (Zecevic, Tremblay, Lovsin, & Michel, 2010). Schools are the best place for students to learn and experience how to be healthy and active. A comprehensive approach like the Champion schools initiative is an excellent model for other states to follow.

How to Become a Champion School

Figure 5 illustrates the four steps for becoming a Champion school.

1. Find a Champion

To get started, one person is needed. That person is the *champion* of the project. This person can be a physical education teacher, health education teacher, classroom teacher, administrator, school nurse, wellness coordinator, or even a parent. Another logical group to consider in the implementation phase is the School Wellness Council. These individuals have a vested interest in the health and well-being of students, faculty and staff, and should be well equipped to help the school become a Champion school. The Champions initiative can go hand-in-hand with an already existing comprehensive school physical activity program, the WSCC model, and the existing district and school wellness policies.

Each local educational agency that participates in the National School Lunch Program or other federal child nutrition programs is required by federal law to establish a local school wellness policy for all schools under its jurisdiction. School wellness policies are a great source of information and a starting point for Champion schools. School wellness policies contain valuable information on how the school district can be part of the solution to childhood obesity, promoting health and wellness in the schools, and providing nutritious foods for students and staff.



Figure 5. How to become a Champion school

Alabama chose to focus on three areas for the Champion schools: 1) provide 60 minutes of physical activity throughout the academic day; 2) provide nutritious meals, nutritious smart snacks, and alternate fundraisers to consumable foods; and 3) engage parents, staff and the community in the initiative.

2. Encourage Others to Help—Establish Partners

This particular initiative's key partners include the Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Department of Public Health; ASAPERD; Alliance for a Healthier Generation; and HEAL Alabama. These key partners help to advance the mission and vision of the Champions initiative, as well as provide support and resources as needed for the school systems that are currently involved. Champions are encouraged to find partners in their own state to help with the initiative.

3. Determine the Needs of Your Environment

The School Health Index (SHI) is an online self-assessment instrument that schools can use to improve their health and safety policies, as well as identify areas for improvement (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Using the SHI is a straightforward, no-cost way to determine the needs of your environment. Alabama chose to focus on three areas for the Champion schools: 1) provide 60 minutes of physical activity throughout the academic day; 2) provide nutritious meals, nutritious smart snacks, and alternate fundraisers to consumable foods; and 3) engage parents, staff and the community in the initiative. Each champion should decide on the components that are most needed and will work best for a given school and the students' needs. While the Alabama Champion schools initiative believes the physical activity, nutrition, and family/community approach is best, each environment and situation is different. Each school should use the SHI results, staff needs assessment, and school wellness policy to help identify what is most needed.

4. Create a Plan to Address the SHI Results

Begin with one goal for the year for the school. Make the goal challenging but reachable. After achieving that goal, set another goal and revise the plan. The Champion schools initiative can be implemented over time and can build on small, achievable successes. Start with an army of the willing! Becoming a champion for a school is worth the effort. It is also an investment in the health and wellness of the children in the community.

Overcoming Barriers

As with any new initiative, there will be some common barriers to becoming a Champion school. One barrier is the lack

of administrative support, or buy-in from key school personnel. One approach to overcoming this barrier is to invite the school principal, and other key stakeholders or decision makers, to a training. Exposing leaders to the benefits of the program is one way to get their buy-in. In addition, the physical education and health education teachers can continue to share the Champion school message with their colleagues and continue to advocate for program implementation.

Sometimes it can be difficult to get buy-in from other school personnel such as teachers and staff members. One approach in working with faculty and staff is to demonstrate how the Champion schools program can work on a small level, in order to get started. For example, if even one classroom teacher will agree to do brain booster activities during the school day, that is a small win that has the potential to catch on with other teachers. Many of the successes in Alabama have resulted from one teacher trying something new and having other teachers realize that the small change does make a big difference.

Another barrier that can exist is a lack of communication among school personnel during the development of the school wellness policy. Often, the school nutrition professional is tasked with the responsibility of developing the school wellness policy. In many cases, this individual does not necessarily include the physical education or health education teacher in developing the policy. Ensuring that the health and physical education staff are working closely with the school nutrition professional is critical for helping schools create a healthy environment for all children.

The final barrier is a significant one that can be easily avoided: trying to do too much, too soon. The Champion schools program is more likely to be successful when the champion chooses one thing to focus on and does not take on too much at once. Again, even small changes are beneficial to students. The champions and supporting partners do not need to feel overwhelmed. Once a small change is made, additional changes become easier to make in the future. So, start small and know that you are making a difference!

Champion Schools Success Story

There are numerous Champion school success stories throughout the state of Alabama. One in particular stands out, as it reflects both the success of the program and the gradual change in school culture that resulted from participating in the

Champion schools initiative. A K–8 school in Alabama started with one goal of creating a before-school walking program. Initially, students were allowed to walk one morning a week until two years ago when the principal agreed to allow the students to walk every morning before school. Students who arrive at the school by bus usually have 35 minutes to walk before classes begin. Teachers began to report that those students who walk every morning come to class more calm and ready to learn. The teachers across the school now fully support the walking program as they see the difference it has made, not only in the students, but in their ability to successfully teach students throughout the day.

This successful school started small, with a walking program one day a week, and then expanded the walking program to five days a week. Once the walking program was initiated and working well, the physical education teacher began working with classroom teachers to incorporate opportunities for movement during the school day. Currently, all teachers at the school participate in “brain boosters” throughout the day. These

activities provide students with the opportunity, at the end of a lesson, to stand up, move around, burn off energy, and start the next lesson more focused. In addition, the teachers are now taking students outside for activity breaks, weather permitting. These 15-minute breaks provide for a five-minute snack and 10 minutes of activity. Having the opportunity to be active outside, especially when recess is no longer provided, is a welcome opportunity for both students and teachers. Starting slowly with one goal in mind is the key to a successful Champion schools program. Over time, it becomes easier to create and realize additional goals. Faculty and staff buy-in is also critical, and small victories help to “win over” skeptics and create a healthy school culture.

School administrative support is critical to the long-term success of the Champions initiative. While any one individual, or a group of individuals, can start a Champions program at their school, administrative buy-in will help the program to grow and become an integral part of the school culture. If the school principal, or assistant principal, will participate and take



an active role as a partner, this will send a clear message to all faculty, staff, students and parents that the school takes the health of their school children very seriously.

Conclusion

School champions can be, but are not limited to, physical education teachers, classroom teachers, administrators, school nurses, students, counselors, child nutrition personnel, parents, and special education/disability advocates. The Alabama Champions for Healthy, Active Schools is a great advocacy tool because of the relationships it forges, not only inside of the school but with external partners that are all working in concert to make the Champions initiative a statewide success. By collaborating with families, school staff, and outside entities that have a stake in the health of school children and staff, Alabama Champion schools are strengthened by the broad, community-based partnership approach. This initiative can be easily replicated in other states and schools and just needs one person to get started. Today is a great day to be that champion!

Acknowledgment

We are grateful for the contributions of Nancy Ray, Alabama State Department of Education and Penny Edwards, Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

References

ASCD. (2014). ASCD, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). *Whole school, whole community, whole child: A collaborative approach to learning and health*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/wholechild/wsc-a-collaborative-approach.pdf>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Health and academic achievement*. Atlanta, GA: Author.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). *School Health Index*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/shi/index.htm>

Ratey, J. (2015). *Exercise is like Miracle Gro for the brain*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAscixYsSFs>

Ratey, J. J., & Hagerman, E. (2008). *Spark: The revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*. New York, NY: Little, Brown. SHAPE

America – Society of Health and Physical Educators. (2014). *National standards & grade-level outcomes for K–12 physical education*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators. (2015). *The essential components of physical education*. Reston, VA: Author.

Telama, R., Yang, X., Viikari, J., Välimäki, I., Wanne, O., & Raitakari, O. (2005). Physical activity from childhood to adulthood: A 21-year tracking study. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 28(3), 267–273.

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). (2017). *Team Nutrition, Local School Wellness Policy*. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy>

Zecevic, C. A., Tremblay, L., Lovsin, T., & Michel, L. (2010). Parental influence on young children's physical activity. *International Journal of Pediatrics*, 2010, 1–9. 

Charity L. Bryan (cbryan4@kennesaw.edu) is an associate professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Physical Education at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, GA; Sandra K. Sims is an associate professor in the Department of Human Studies at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, in Birmingham, AL; Donna L. Dunaway is a curriculum specialist for Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Alabama; and Donna J. Hester is the executive director of the Alabama State Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (ASAHPERD).