



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Weight-Neutral Wellbeing in the School Setting

A Condensed Summary of Research and Recommendations
by the Body Image Research Lab

Weight Bias and Diet Culture

Weight bias includes the negative attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes about individuals with large bodies. **Diet culture** is characterized by a preference for thin bodies, moralization of weight, and a belief that thinness represents good health. Weight bias and diet culture beliefs can permeate all aspects of our lives, including health promotion efforts in schools that seek to improve the health of students through a focus on body weight. A **weight-neutral** approach considers various dimensions of health and is focused on choices and behaviours instead of weight. The weight-neutral approach is health-promoting and inclusive for all bodies.

Weight-Centric Health Promotion in Schools Compromises Student Wellbeing

Because weight bias and diet culture are so commonplace in our culture, weight-centric messages can influence well-intended efforts to teach or promote health in the school setting. Research has repeatedly shown that the school setting is not an appropriate context for health interventions related to body size, and that messages that simplistically link health with weight are health-demeaning. Teachers are more likely to

struggle with disordered eating and eating disorders than the general population, and may not have been given specific training on the complex topics of nutrition or body image, which can all negatively impact health messages at school.



Photo Source: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health

Unintended Harm: Reinforcement of Weight Bias

Weight is very complex, and influenced by numerous factors including genetics, culture, food environment, and physical activity. When health messages in the school setting suggest that a so-called “healthy weight” is completely under an individual’s control, weight bias in the school setting is unintentionally perpetuated, and students with larger bodies may experience greater stigma. Students of all sizes report bullying based on weight more frequently than bullying based on academic ability, physical ability, race, religion, or class. Weight-based bullying in the school setting teaches weight bias to both victims and bystanders and is associated with several negative physical and psychological consequences, including body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors.

Unintended Harm: Eating Disorder Risk

Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that arise from a complex combination of factors. Some students are more vulnerable to developing an eating disorder due to genetic factors, family environment, personality, or co-occurring mental conditions (i.e. autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and anxiety). An emphasis on maintaining a “healthy weight” increases eating disorder risk even when the dangers of eating disorders are discussed in the classroom. Even very young students may have weight-loss goals that can distort their interpretation of health messages in school. Research has found that learning assignments that invite students to measure their weight/BMI or encourage the tracking of food, calories, steps, or other forms of exercise can prime vulnerable students for a disordered and unhealthy relationship with their bodies.

**SCHOOL IS FOR
EVERY BODY**

Recommendations for Practice: Weight-Neutral Approaches to Comprehensive School Health

A Comprehensive School Health approach considers the multi-dimensional wellbeing of all members of a school community and relies on four inter-related components related to health education and health promotion. The Comprehensive School Health framework is a useful tool for considering how to ensure health is promoted from a weight-neutral perspective in the school setting. While each school will have its own specific needs to address, the following suggestions are recommended for creating schools where all students can thrive.

Teaching & Learning

- Teachers can access professional learning to address their own relationship with their body and how to teach from a weight-neutral perspective
- Classroom activities avoid measurement or tracking of body size (height/weight), food intake (calories), or physical activity
- Classroom resources positively depict bodies of different size, shape, race, ability, and gender
- Health and Physical Education lessons emphasize benefits of nutrition and activity instead of fear-based messages; avoid messages that simplistically categorize foods as good/bad

Social & Physical Environment

- Schools are free from discussions about dieting, weight loss, or commenting on others' bodies
- Meal supervision emphasizes creating a sociable and comfortable atmosphere; students feel supported in choosing what and how much to eat of their food, and in the order they choose
- Remove scales from student areas and ensure that desks, chairs, playground equipment, costumes, jerseys, uniforms, etc. can accommodate students of all sizes

Policies & Practices

- Bullying policies explicitly prohibit any form of body-based discrimination and take weight-based bullying as seriously as other forms of discrimination
- A non-food reward policy can emphasize the benefits of the policy (i.e. reduced burden on parents and caretakers, safer for students with allergies) without calling celebratory treats unhealthy or "junk food"

Partnerships & Services

- Respect parents' food choices; avoid messages that could increase shame or pressure around food for students' families
- Guest speakers invited to address a health topic should be vetted and informed of the school's weight-neutral approach to health
- Teachers and guidance counsellors can work together for prompt referral of students who may be struggling with disordered eating to mental health professionals; early intervention is key to the treatment of eating disorders

References & Recommended Resources

This summary is based largely on the following publication:

Tingle, E., Saunders, J. F., Nutter, S., & Russell-Mayhew, S. (2023). Taking weight out of the equation: Unintended harms of weight-focused health promotion in schools. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, 94(2), 49–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2022.2146818>

We also recommend the following seminal articles on the weight-neutral paradigm and summaries of current research for further reading:

Bacon, L., & Aphramor, L. (2011). Weight science: Evaluating the evidence for a paradigm shift. *Nutrition Journal*, 10, 69. <https://nutritionj.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1475-2891-10-9>

Mauldin, K., May, M., & Clifford, D. (2022). The consequences of a weight-centric approach to health care: A case for a paradigm shift in how clinicians address body weight. *Nutrition in Clinical Practice*, 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncp.10885>

Nutter, S., Ireland, A., Alberga, A. S., Brun, I., Lefebvre, D., Hayden, K. A., & Russell-Mayhew, S. (2019). Weight bias in educational settings: A systematic review. *Current Obesity Reports*, 8, 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13679-019-00330-8>

O'Dea, J. (2005). Prevention of child obesity: 'First, do no harm.' *Health Education Research*, 20(2), 259–265. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyg116>

Pinhas, L., McVey, G., Walker, K. S., Norris, M., Katzman, D., & Collier, S. (2013). Trading health for a healthy weight: The uncharted side of healthy weights initiatives. *Eating Disorders*, 21(2), 109–116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640266.2013.761082>

Piran, N. (2004). Teachers: On "being" (rather than "doing") prevention. *Eating Disorders*, 12, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640260490267724>

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