

Source: Coleman K, Heath EM. Health Educ Behav 2002;29:444-60

School Programs - Obesity Prevention

As the US Senate considers a proposed bill on obesity prevention, results of a study in El Paso, Texas, suggest those who deride such initiatives as unlikely to be successful may be wrong.

In 1997, 20 elementary schools started a Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) programme, which involved healthier school meals and more physical education, while another four schools did not participate and were used as controls.

There was a definite improvement in school breakfast composition, with less (under 30%) fat and sodium (under 1000mg) than the regular products, although the improvement in lunches was less consistent.

Physical activity also increased.

In the control schools, activity levels did not change and meal fat content actually increased. While it cannot be proven the changes were a direct result of the programme, it seems probable. A large amount of funding and effort was involved, but the effort and dedication of those involved and the funding may be difficult to replicate on a broader community basis. The programme had one definite indirect benefit. The school authorities rejected a proposal by a soft drink company to have a 10-year contract to provide soft drinks, and instead they agreed a contract to provide water, pure fruit juice and non-fat milk instead.