

# Taking Action for Healthy Kids in schools — and beyond

by Jean Ragalie

**Y**OUR dairy checkoff is dedicated to the principle that what's good for youth nutrition is good for dairy. Young people are dairy's number one priority for two important reasons. They are at a growing risk for obesity (one in five 4-year-olds is now obese) and its related health problems. Also, today's youth represent significant current milk and dairy consumption and are the core of our future consumers. We cannot afford to lose them.

## Kids are key . . .

School remains the best place to reach our 55 million young people. School also is an important focus of government agencies, health professionals, and activists. These groups are all advancing their own perspectives on youth wellness, including nutrition and physical activity.

For years, dairy has been a staple on the school lunch line where 30 million lunches are served each school day. That could change, however. Dairy must offer schools a comprehensive solution through workable wellness policies. We also need to prove that kids will consume more dairy and other nutrient-rich foods if these foods are offered in a way kids really like them. For that to happen, we must work to keep the school door open for brand and processor activity through new product development and innovation.

We have made a substantial investment in changing attitudes and behaviors among youth, beginning in schools. If young people continue to stop consuming dairy at younger and younger ages, their future — and ours — is in jeopardy.

Because schools are a natural laboratory for learning good habits and because children spend up to 200 days a year there, keeping dairy as a daily part of school children's lives is of utmost importance.

Everything your dairy checkoff does with youth — from in-school

programs to nutrition research ingredient formulation to assistance in new product development and innovation — is aimed at keeping dairy available and desirable to kids, beginning in schools.

A decade ago, National Dairy Council (NDC), the nutrition research and education arm of the dairy checkoff program, and local dairy councils around the country began meeting with education and health leaders about childhood obesity and the role that school nutrition, along with physical activity, plays in its prevention. Shortly thereafter, the Surgeon General released the "Call to action to decrease and prevent overweight and obesity," calling for private-public partnerships to find solutions.

NDC spearheaded a coalition of 38 organizations to develop the landmark Healthy Schools Summit in 2002. The Summit spawned a nonprofit organization named "Action for Healthy Kids" (AFHK) led by former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher. AFHK now has more than 60 national partner organizations and teams of leaders in every state.

AFHK's charge is to motivate and provide support to leaders in health and education at national and state levels to help schools implement the Surgeon General's goals to improve nutrition and physical activity in every school. AFHK has been a leader in school wellness policies . . . reaching administrators, teachers, school food service professionals, and others who can lead change in the school building and the school district.

AFHK helps further dairy's strong relationship with health professional groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Because health professionals in these organizations are influential with their patients and their colleagues, ensuring that

they understand and support dairy's role in a healthy diet is key to dairy's long-term success.

All told, AFHK has seen notable success in its seven years of existence. AFHK has helped NDC emerge as a thought leader in developing a public-private partnership to address childhood obesity. It has brought greater recognition of the dairy industry's leadership in promoting children's health and wellness and in getting other organizations to take on this cause. And it has played a role in limiting the expanse of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods in schools.



Even with these accomplishments, there remains much more to do in schools. Above and beyond AFHK, the National Dairy Council has initiated the Child Nutrition and Fitness Initiative (CNFI), a comprehensive effort of a broad dairy industry coalition that gives our nation's youth a reason to choose and consume more dairy . . . in schools and beyond. This, in turn, helps build lifelong dairy consumers and protect the role of dairy in the lives of America's young people.

The Child Nutrition and Fitness Initiative has these major components:

**Health and wellness in schools.** CNFI encourages kids to eat dairy and other nutrient-rich foods and get 60 minutes of physical activity every day. The program which includes a partnership with the National Football League (NFL) is reaching 40,000 schools this school year.

**Youth engagement.** A big challenge for dairy in schools is how to engage the students in a meaningful way. Dairy councils have learned

that students themselves can be agents of change in the school. They lack only the incentive, the opportunity, and the tools to do so. In enhanced school programs being tested in 11 pilot markets, CNFI is rewarding students for making a difference in their schools by improving access to healthy food options and encouraging peers to adopt healthy habits. This program, called "Fuel up to play," uses the NFL's physical fitness legacy and star power to heighten interest and participation among kids and schools.

**Dairy industry partnerships.** NDC cannot on its own do all the work of keeping children as lifelong dairy consumers. NDC continues to reach out to industry partners that can provide additional resources to grow the effort and lessen the load on dairy producers.

NDC is engaging other partners interested in youth wellness and healthy eating, including the School Nutrition Association, the National Education Association, and some of the most respected health professional organizations.

Equally as important, processors and brand marketers are working to give kids products in the flavors, sizes, forms, and containers that satisfy their needs and wants. Just as the dairy checkoff helped improve milk sales at McDonald's, Wendy's, and other national restaurant chains by offering milk in plastic bottles, and just as we helped Domino's Pizza surpass sales targets with new pizzas featuring a lot more cheese, the dairy checkoff is now working with the industry to accelerate new product development serving today's schools. These developments will be critical in keeping children as lifelong consumers of dairy.

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