EVOLVING OBESITY PREVENTION POLICIES IN UNITED STATES ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: 1966-2014

Abstract

Child obesity is a growing public health concern because of its association with the risk for development of chronic diseases. Presently, ways to address childhood obesity are being examined. The purpose of this systematic literature review was to examine school health promotion policies and to highlight changes that are being made to elementary school policies that impact the five areas of general wellness (competitive foods, school meals, nutrition education, physical education, and physical activity). The PubMed and Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL) databases were searched from 1966 to 2014. Articles were included if they included a policy that impacted one of the five areas of wellness in elementary schools and was based in the United States. The literature search generated 83 journal articles and 20 full-text articles were reviewed. Policies regarding physical education and school meals have been around for many decades, while policies emphasizing competitive foods, nutrition education, and physical activity began to emerge as obesity rates in children climbed. Passing policies is a political process and the most common policies passed are those that are supported by a multidisciplinary team and that require very little investment in terms of time or money. School funding and increasing pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests were found to be barriers to policy implementation. The findings suggest that efforts towards preventing obesity by enacting policies at the federal, state and local levels as obesity rates have continued to climb. While policy enactment has increased, policy implementation and enforcement rates of these policies are low or not evaluated at all, which could make implementation and enforcement a subject of future interventions.