

How to Create a Body Positive School Environment

Do's:

- Teach your students to be assertive (find their voice).
- Be a positive role model. If students overhear their teachers criticizing their own bodies or observe them adhering to the newest fad diet, it reinforces this behavior in the students.
- Talk about genetic differences in body types.
- Emphasize *inner* beauty and qualities.
- Celebrate different body shapes.
- Teach media literacy skills.
- Increase support if the environment is stressful (offer counseling, support groups, etc.).
- Encourage faculty to explore their thoughts about their own bodies and behaviors surrounding food and exercise.
- Create a “teasing free” environment. This may include a creed to be displayed in each classroom and/or a list of consequences for any student found teasing on school grounds.
- Attempt to provide as many food choices as possible in the cafeteria. Some options may include a soup and salad bar, deli, pasta bar, fruit stand or yogurt machine.
- Promote health and fun in athletics vs. a “win at all costs” mentality.
- Re-evaluate whether or not your students have adequate time in which to eat. If possible, incorporate snack times during the school day.
- All posters and/or pictures displayed in your school should be representative of all body sizes and shapes.
- Create a resource area in which basic information on eating disorders, nutrition and body image, as well as a referral directory of where professional help is available. Try to de-stigmatize all mental illnesses by talking about them and providing information that is easily accessible.
- Make media literacy fun. Show students pictures before and after Photoshop, talk about the effects of the media on body image and ask students to get involved educating their peers and family about media literacy.
- Educate students about emotional strength and teach them ways to identify their feelings, and express them in a healthy way. Talk with students about ways to handle intense emotions.

Don'ts:

- Use food as reward or punishment.
- Heavily restrict a student's diet.
- Categorize foods as "good" or "bad."
- Comment on student's body shape/weight.
- Let negative body image comments or behaviors go without discussion.
- Talk about diets, weight, or specifics related to appearance of yourself, staff, students.
- Expect perfection in performance or over-emphasize performance review.
- Tolerate teasing relating to appearance. Just as it is inappropriate and unkind to make a racial or religious slur, the same is true for body size and shape. Avoid displaying the calorie or fat content in meals served at school. This may exacerbate someone's preexisting inclination to obsess about calories and fat grams and set them up to ignore their hunger for fear of gaining weight.
- Promote staying active as a way for students to live healthier lives instead of eating low calorie or low fat foods.
- Refrain from weighing your students or subjecting them to body fat analysis. It can be embarrassing and hurtful to an adolescent to have his/her weight and body fat publicly monitored. If these practices are mandatory at your school, they should be done in private and the results kept confidential. Parents should always be given the opportunity to opt out.