

Trimming the **FAT**

NUTRITION PROGRAM TARGETS MIDDLE-SCHOOL KIDS

Seventh- and eighth-grade students at Booker T. Washington K-8 school are getting the skinny on ways to stay healthy, thanks to an intervention program planned by Monica Baskin, assistant professor of health behavior, and health behavior doctoral student Christie Malpede.

"We thought early intervention with a group of African-American youngsters might help establish healthy behavior patterns that would reduce their risk of chronic illness later in life," Baskin says.

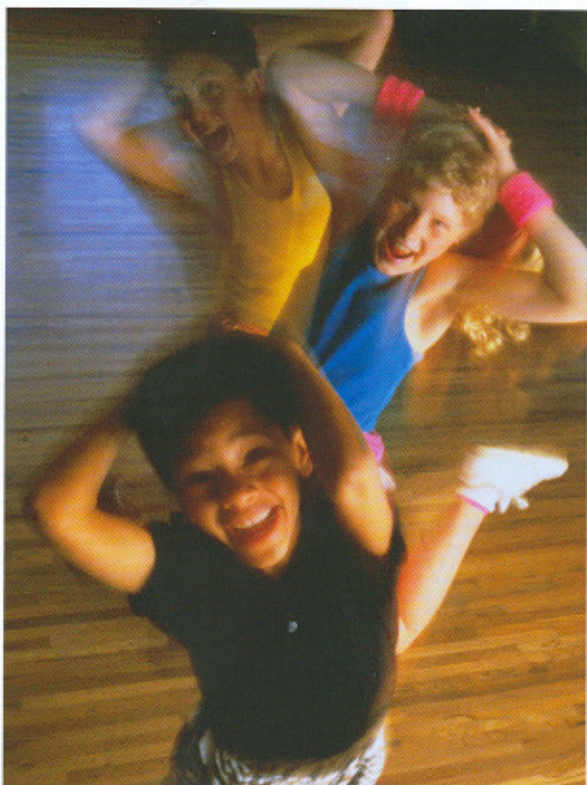
The program, funded by a grant from the Association of Schools of Public Health and MetLife Foundation through the Healthy Schools Initiative, uses a two-pronged approach to hone in on diet and exercise. Students learn about good nutrition—including details about how to make healthy food choices—and also participate in an enhanced physical education program that includes fun activities like Jazzercise.

Preliminary results from the study demonstrate a reduction in body-mass index (BMI) among overweight students, as well as an improvement in students' overall eating habits. Baskin says that the program has been well received by students and staff and that the kids seem genuinely interested, which bodes well for adherence to healthy eating habits in the future.

Part of the program's beauty is its sustainability. Initially, School of Public Health researchers led the program when it was begun last fall. But since then Booker T. Washington school administrators have kept it going, including retaining the exercise equipment that UIAB provided.

"We wanted to create a program that could be easily sustained by the schools," says Baskin, who also has applied for additional funding to expand the program to schools throughout the Birmingham area.

When it comes to devising interventions that target overweight kids, Baskin believes it's particularly important to focus



Intervention uses diet and exercise to create positive health behaviors in kids.

on African-American girls. Sixteen percent of African-American girls age 6-19 are overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This represents a 45-percent increase in overweight for this group since 1994. African-American girls have the highest overall overweight rates among girls of all races, Baskin says. African-Americans in general have higher rates of chronic diseases associated with obesity, such as type-2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

However, Baskin maintains that interventions such as the one she and her team implemented can't by themselves make a dent in the problem of youth obesity. "Projects like this need to be executed in combination with other interventions," she says. "We also need to focus on programs that involve families and communities."

"We have a responsibility to our children. We owe it to them to make sure they have the knowledge and skills to lead more healthy lives."