Preventing Early Childhood Obesity in North Carolina

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Childhood obesity continues to be one of the largest public health crises in the nation. One-third of children and teens nationwide are overweight or obese,¹ and more than half of obese children become obese at or before the age of two.²

Recent research indicating that lifelong health is largely determined during the formative years of early childhood³ points to the importance of establishing healthy lifestyle behaviors before children enter kindergarten. In North Carolina, 29 percent of low-income children ages two to four years attending a state-funded health clinic are overweight or obese.⁴

Thirty-four percent of North Carolina children under the age of six spend all or part of their days in licensed child care centers⁵ where they consume up to two meals and two snacks a day.

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC) Foundation recognizes that these child care centers can influence healthy behaviors in young children and has been collaborating with early childhood experts for the past decade through investments in three programs:

- Be Active Kids®, a BCBSNC Foundation signature program
- Preventing Obesity by Design (POD), a program out of the Natural Learning Initiative from NC State University’s College of Design
- Nutrition and Physical Activity Self Assessment for Child Care (NAP SACC), a program of the University of North Carolina’s Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

In order to truly impact early childhood obesity in North Carolina, the BCBSNC Foundation recognized a comprehensive approach was needed and built upon the successful aspects of each of these programs. In 2011, BCBSNC Foundation created Shape NC: Healthy Starts for Young Children, a three-year, $3 million collaboration with The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc. (NCPC). Based on the success of the first phase of the program, BCBSNC Foundation approved an additional $3 million for a three-year Shape NC extension (phase II).

A HISTORY OF COLLABORATION

BCBSNC Foundation and NCPC have a strong history of working together on projects impacting healthy eating habits and active play for young children. The second $3 million grant allows the initiative to expand its work through NCPC and Smart Start, a network of 76 nonprofit local partnerships serving all 100 North Carolina counties. NCPC provides statewide governance to the Smart Start partnerships in addition to resources for local innovation. Smart Start’s dedication to quality early care and education, its broad reach across North Carolina, and its accessible, centralized leadership made it an ideal partner in this endeavor.

HOW SHAPE NC WORKS

Shape NC is designed to improve policies, practices and outdoor environments in child care centers, while advancing the health of North Carolina’s young children at the state and community levels. Shape NC’s ultimate goal is to increase the number of young children starting kindergarten at a healthy weight.

Shape NC has chosen to collaborate with the network of Smart Start partnerships due, in part, to their established relationships with the child care centers in their communities. Nineteen Smart Start partnerships participated in phase I of Shape NC, and four of those partnerships were designated as “hub” partners, providing training and services to their own community and other Smart Start partnerships. Within each of the 19 Smart Start partnerships, Shape NC engaged child care centers and designated those as Shape Model Early Learning Centers. Each center received intensive assistance from a specialist trained in the core best practices of Shape NC: nutrition, physical activity and outdoor learning environments. Shape Model Early Learning Centers that achieve rigorous benchmarks set by Shape NC will be designated as demonstration sites and will provide tours and guidance to neighboring centers wanting to make similar improvements. During phase II, children’s body mass index will be tracked over time. The goal is to increase the percentage of children who are at a healthy weight in Shape Model Early Learning Centers.
Shape NC also has a strong focus on community involvement. During phase I, Smart Start partnerships convened community action teams. The local teams of stakeholders, including members from Shape Model Early Learning Centers and representatives from agencies such as health departments, government offices, local colleges, health care providers and school systems, created and began to implement action plans for obesity prevention in their communities. Building upon the success of these community action plans, phase II will incorporate the ABLe Change framework to support the future work of the community action teams. ABLe Change was developed by experts at Michigan State University and is an evidence-informed framework that guides communities in identifying the root causes of social issues and provides tools and strategies for creating system change. With the support of community engagement specialists housed at the hub partnerships, the community action teams will use the ABLe Change framework to implement their community action plans in phase II.

At the request of the BCBSNC Foundation, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine convened an Early Childhood Obesity Prevention Task Force to address children’s health at the state level. The task force compiled state and national recommendations related to improving healthy weight in children ages birth to five and, informed by an 18-month stakeholder process, translated those recommendations into a blueprint of actionable strategies that can be implemented in North Carolina on clinical, community and policy levels. Shape NC phase II will bring further examination regarding implementation of these recommendations by community action teams.

PHASE I OUTCOMES
The Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the University of North Carolina evaluated phase I of Shape NC. As a result of the first three years of the program, more than 1,000 children at the 19 Shape Model Early Learning Centers experienced improved access to fruits and vegetables, as well as increased physical activity.

In addition, Smart Start partnerships raised over $1.2 million in supplementary resources to further support Shape NC goals, including grants, cash donations, in-kind assistance, and contributions from the community.

Community contributions to Shape Model Early Learning Centers included landscaping, playground equipment, and cooking and yoga classes. NCPC staff also point to the convergence of diverse community groups working together on the community action teams as a huge Shape NC success.

MOVING FORWARD
With a three-year, $3 million expansion of the program, phase II will be focused on bringing the model to more child care centers across the state, utilizing the ABLe change framework to further instill a culture of health in local communities, and ensuring more children enter kindergarten at a healthy weight.

The following five outcomes are the targets for phase II:

- At least 12 Shape Model Early Learning Centers will become demonstration sites to serve as models within their communities
- At least 240 new child care centers will implement nutrition, physical activity and outdoor learning environment best practices
- At least 8 Smart Start partnerships will use the ABLe change framework to develop systems that support healthy weight among young children in their communities
- The percentage of children at a healthy weight in the phase I child care centers will increase over time
- At least 2,000 early childhood professionals will successfully complete an online professional development series presenting Shape NC content and implementation strategies

Work plans are being developed for each outcome to ensure success. Shape NC will continue to track program strategies to meet the changing needs of child care centers in providing healthy environments for children.

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