

Weight Stigma in Schools

A Guide for Educators and
Teachers



Table of Contents

01	<u>Introduction</u>	03
02	<u>What is Weight Stigma</u>	06
03	<u>Why Educators Need to Address Weight Stigma</u>	09
04	<u>Examples of Weight Stigma in School Environments</u>	12
05	<u>The Impact of Weight Stigma on Students</u>	16
06	<u>Preventing and Addressing Weight Stigma in Schools</u>	19
07	<u>Creating Inclusive Classroom Policies and Practices</u>	23
08	<u>Responding to Incidents of Weight-Based Bullying</u>	25
09	<u>Supporting Students and Fostering Body Diversity</u>	27
10	<u>Resources for Educators</u>	29
11	<u>Final Thoughts</u>	31

01

Introduction

Purpose of this workbook

Children and adolescents spend a significant portion of their lives in school, where they form beliefs about themselves and others.

Educators, such as teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff, play a powerful role in shaping these beliefs. This booklet is designed to help school personnel recognize, understand, and address weight stigma in educational settings.



Weight stigma refers to bias, stereotypes, or unfair treatment based on body size. It can deeply affect students' mental health, academic engagement, and social development. By increasing awareness and offering practical strategies, this resource supports educators in creating inclusive, respectful environments where all students feel safe and valued, regardless of body size.

Our goals for this booklet include:

- **Increase Awareness:** Help educators understand what weight stigma is, including both overt (explicit) and subtle (implicit) forms.
- **Highlight Impact:** Show how weight stigma affects students' mental, physical, academic, and social well-being.
- **Identify Contexts:** Explore where weight stigma shows up in classrooms, school policies, curriculum, and peer interactions.
- **Promote Empathy and Inclusivity:** Encourage respectful attitudes and behaviors toward students of all body sizes.
- **Support Positive Change:** Provide actionable strategies for fostering body respect, supporting student well-being, and preventing stigma in school environments.

Why Weight Stigma Matters in Education

Weight stigma is not just a social issue; it's an educational equity issue. Students who experience weight-based bias may struggle with self-esteem, avoid participation, and disengage from learning. These effects can be long-lasting, influencing academic performance, peer relationships, and overall development.

Educators have a unique opportunity to challenge stigma and promote body respect. By fostering inclusive classrooms and modeling respectful behavior, school staff can help students build resilience, confidence, and a healthy relationship with their bodies.

Who this booklet is for

This booklet is intended for:

- **Teachers:** Across all subjects and grade levels
- **School Counselors and Psychologists:** Supporting student mental health and well-being
- **Administrators:** Shaping school culture and policies
- **Support Staff:** Including cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and aids who interact with students daily

Whether you work directly with students or help shape the school environment, your role is vital in preventing weight stigma and promoting a culture of respect and inclusion.

02

What is Weight Stigma?

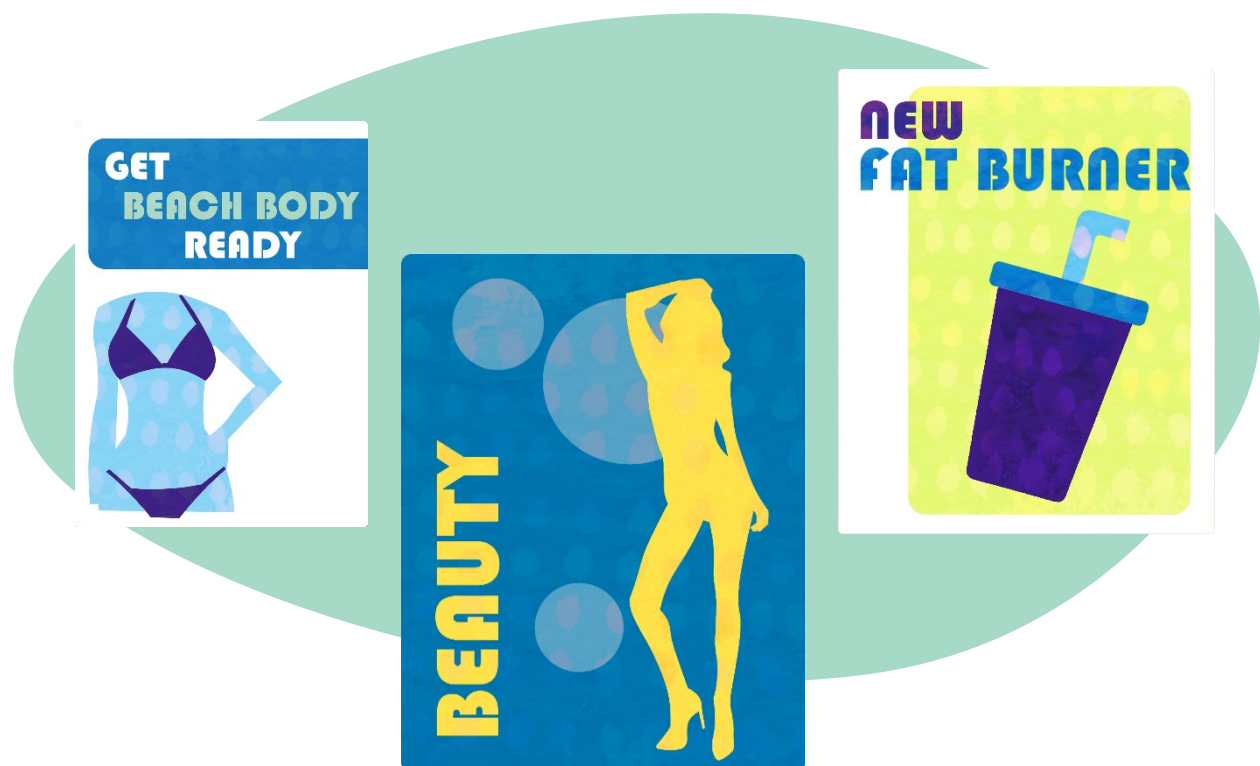
Definition

Weight stigma refers to the negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors directed at individuals because of their body size. In educational settings, this can manifest in subtle or overt ways, from peer teasing and exclusion to biased assumptions made by adults about a student's abilities, health, or character. These attitudes are often rooted in societal norms that equate thinness with discipline, health, and worth, while viewing larger bodies as undesirable or problematic.

Weight stigma is sometimes referred to by other terms, including:

- **Weight bias:** the internalized or expressed prejudice against individuals in larger bodies.
- **Sizeism:** systemic discrimination based on body size.
- **Fatphobia:** a cultural fear or aversion to fatness, often reinforced through media, health messaging, and institutional practices.

While these terms may vary in tone and usage, they all describe the same underlying issue: the devaluation of individuals based on body size.



Implicit vs. Explicit Bias

Weight stigma can be overt (explicit) or subtle (implicit):

- Overt stigma includes direct actions or comments, such as teasing, name-calling, or excluding a student from an activity because of their size.
- Subtle stigma involves unconscious attitudes or behaviors, such as assuming a student in a larger body is less athletic, less healthy, or less capable of leadership.

Educators may unintentionally reinforce stigma through well-meaning but harmful language (e.g., praising weight loss as a sign of success) or by failing to intervene when weight-based teasing occurs. Recognizing and addressing these patterns is essential for creating inclusive learning environments.

Systemic vs. Interpersonal Bias

Weight stigma operates on multiple levels:

- **Systemic (Policy-Based)**: School policies, curricula, and physical environments can unintentionally marginalize students in larger bodies. Examples include:
 - Uniforms that don't fit all students comfortably
 - Health lessons that focus narrowly on BMI or dieting
 - Desks, chairs, or PE equipment that are not size-inclusive
- **Interpersonal (Peer-to-Peer or Teacher-to-Student)**: This includes teasing, exclusion, or biased treatment from peers or adults. For instance:
 - A student being picked last in gym class due to assumptions about their fitness
 - A teacher commenting on a student's lunch or body in front of others
 - A counselor focusing on weight loss as a solution to unrelated emotional concerns

Both forms of stigma can have lasting effects on students' self-esteem, academic engagement, and mental health. Because schools are central to children's development, educators have a unique opportunity – and responsibility – to recognize and disrupt these patterns.

03

Why Educators Need to Address Weight Stigma



Introduction

Education goes beyond academics. Schools are where students develop socially, form their identities, and grow emotionally. The messages students receive in classrooms, hallways, and cafeterias shape how they see themselves and others. When students face weight stigma, whether from peers, school policies, or adult models, it can have lasting impacts on their confidence, participation, and overall well-being.

Schools Shape Identity and Belonging

From a young age, students begin to internalize messages about body image, health, and worth. These beliefs are often reinforced by what they see and hear at school. When students in larger bodies are teased, excluded, or treated differently, they may begin to associate their size with shame or failure. Over time, this can erode self-esteem and contribute to disordered eating, social withdrawal, or disengagement from learning.

By contrast, when schools actively promote body diversity and challenge weight-based stereotypes, they help students build resilience, self-respect, and empathy. Creating inclusive environments where all students feel seen and valued supports not only individual development but also a stronger, more connected school culture.

Educators Are Powerful Role Models

Teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators have a profound influence on student attitudes. How adults discuss bodies, food, and health – whether it's their own or others' – can convey strong messages. Even casual remarks like “That snack isn’t healthy” or “That food has too many calories” can reinforce harmful ideas about size and morality. Educators also shape classroom norms. When they intervene in weight-based teasing, use inclusive language, and ensure that all students are physically and emotionally comfortable, they model respect and compassion. These actions help set the tone for how students treat one another and themselves



Addressing Weight Stigma Supports Equity and Well-Being

Going beyond kindness, preventing weight stigma is also a matter of fairness and equality. Students in larger bodies often face barriers that others do not, including limited access to appropriate seating, uniforms, or athletic opportunities. They may also be unfairly judged in academic or behavioral contexts due to implicit bias. Addressing these disparities aligns with broader goals of educational equity, inclusion, and trauma-informed practice. It also supports relationships, reduces stress, promotes positive relationships, and encourages healthy behaviors rooted in self-care rather than shame. When educators recognize and address weight stigma, they help create schools where every student, regardless of their body size, can feel safe, respected, and empowered to thrive.

04

Examples of Weight Stigma in School Environments

Introduction

As we discussed earlier in Section 2, weight stigma can take both overt and subtle forms. It can be expressed through peer interactions, adult behavior, school policies, and even the physical environment. While often unintentional, these experiences can have a profound impact on students' sense of safety, belonging, and self-worth.

Below are common ways weight stigma may show up in educational settings:

Bullying & Teasing

- Name-calling, jokes, or derogatory nicknames
- Exclusion from group activities or games
- Mocking a student's appearance, clothing, or eating habits

Even when framed as “just teasing,” these behaviors can lead to long-term emotional harm and social isolation.

Classroom Dynamics

- Calling attention to what a student is eating or how much
- Making comments about a student's body or fitness level during PE or outside of
- Using weight-related language as a metaphor for laziness or lack of effort (e.g., “Don't be a couch potato”)

These moments can be deeply embarrassing for students and may discourage them from participating or trusting adults.



Curriculum Content

- Equating thinness with success, discipline, or morality
- Overemphasizing BMI as a health indicator without context
- Presenting weight loss as the primary goal of physical activity or nutrition

When curricula fail to reflect body diversity or reinforce harmful stereotypes, they can contribute to internalized shame and disordered behaviors.

Dress Codes

- Policies that penalize students for clothing that fits differently due to body shape
- Enforcement that is inconsistent or more punitive toward students in larger bodies
- Lack of size-inclusive uniform options

These practices can make students feel singled out or ashamed of their bodies.

School Events

- Limited sizing for costumes, uniforms, or spirit wear
- Public weigh-ins during PE or sports tryouts
- Fitness challenges that reward thinness or weight loss

These experiences can exclude or humiliate students, discouraging them from participating in school life.



Staff Attitudes

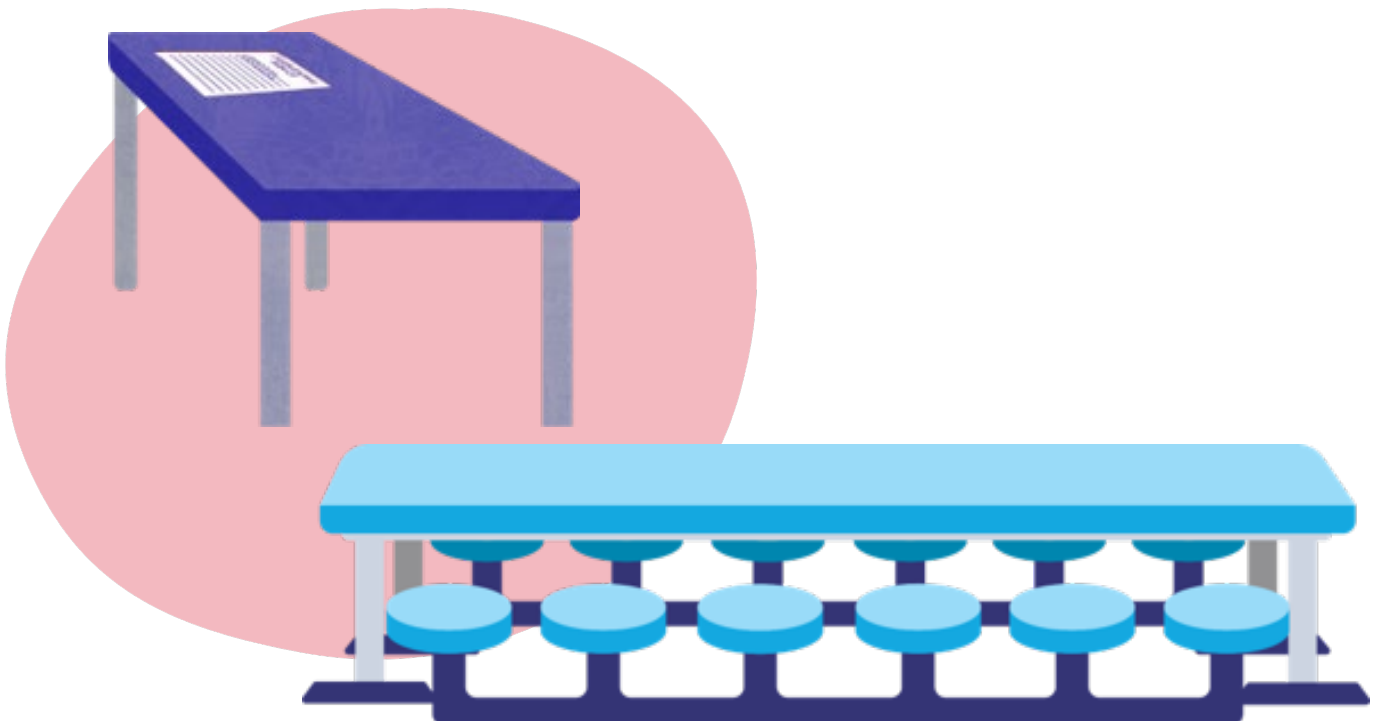
- Assuming a student is unhealthy, unmotivated, or less capable based on their size
- Offering unsolicited advice about diet or exercise
- Focusing on weight in conversations about behavior, attendance, or academic performance

Even well-intentioned comments can reinforce stigma and damage student-teacher relationships.

Physical Environment

- Desks, chairs, or cafeteria seating that are too small or uncomfortable
- PE equipment that doesn't accommodate all body sizes
- Hallways, locker rooms, or buses that lack inclusive design

When students feel physically unwelcome in their environment, it can impact their ability to focus, participate, and feel a sense of belonging.



05

The Impact of Weight Stigma on Students

Introduction

Weight stigma has a far-reaching impact that goes beyond a student's immediate feelings; it can influence their growth in biological, psychological, and social ways. When students in larger bodies are exposed to teasing, exclusion, or biased treatment, the consequences can be profound and long-lasting. A biopsychosocial perspective helps educators understand how these effects interact and compound over time.

Biological Impacts

The stress of experiencing weight stigma can trigger physiological responses that affect students' health and functioning:

- Chronic stress from stigma can elevate cortisol levels, which may disrupt sleep, appetite regulation, and immune function.
- Somatic symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and muscle tension are common in students experiencing ongoing social stress.
- Avoidance of physical activity is also frequent, especially when PE environments feel judgmental or unsafe. This can reduce opportunities for movement-based learning and physical well-being.

These biological responses are not caused by body size itself, but by the stress and exclusion students experience in stigmatizing environments.

Psychological Impacts

Weight stigma can significantly affect students' emotional and cognitive development:

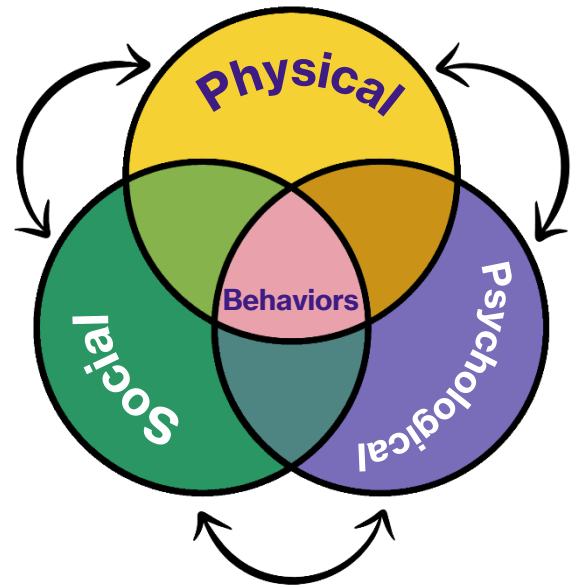
- Low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction often emerge when students internalize negative messages about their bodies.
- Anxiety and depression are more common among students who are teased or excluded because of their weight.
- Cognitive load increases when students are preoccupied with how they are perceived, which can impair attention, memory, and executive functioning – key skills for learning and academic success.
- Disordered eating behaviors may develop as coping mechanisms, including restrictive dieting, binge eating, or secretive eating.

These psychological effects can interfere with a student's ability to fully engage in school and develop a positive sense of self.

Social Impacts

Weight stigma can disrupt students' relationships and sense of belonging:

- Peer rejection and bullying can lead to social withdrawal, loneliness, and mistrust.
- Exclusion from group activities, whether in the classroom, on the playground, or in extracurriculars, limits opportunities for collaboration and skill-building.
- Long-term trust issues with adults may develop if students feel judged, dismissed, or unsupported by teachers, counselors, or coaches.



Social exclusion not only harms emotional well-being but also undermines the collaborative, community-based learning environments that schools strive to create.

Academic Impacts

The academic consequences of weight stigma are deeply intertwined with its biological, psychological, and social effects. When students in larger bodies face exclusion, teasing, or biased treatment, the resulting stress responses (e.g., elevated cortisol, somatic symptoms, and avoidance of physical activity) can impair their physical readiness to learn. Simultaneously, psychological impacts such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and cognitive overload reduce students' capacity to focus, retain information, and engage meaningfully with academic content.

Social exclusion compounds these challenges by eroding students' sense of belonging and trust in the school environment. When students feel unsafe or invalidated, they may withdraw from classroom participation, avoid school altogether, or disengage from the learning process. These behaviors are not signs of disinterest or lack of motivation, but rather adaptive responses to environments that feel threatening or dismissive.

Together, the biological, psychological, and social toll of weight stigma creates barriers to academic success. Recognizing these interconnected impacts allows educators to foster more inclusive, supportive learning environments where all students can thrive.

06

Preventing and Addressing Weight Stigma in Schools

Introduction

Educators play a critical role in shaping how students think about bodies, health, and self-worth. Because weight stigma often goes unrecognized, it's essential to take proactive steps to create inclusive, affirming environments for students of all sizes. Preventing weight stigma is not about avoiding conversations about health; it's about shifting the focus from weight to well-being, and from judgment to respect.



Use Inclusive and Respectful Language

Language matters. Avoid labeling students by their body size or using terms like “overweight” or “obese” in classroom discussions. Instead, use person-first and neutral language when needed (e.g., “students in larger bodies”) and focus on behaviors, not appearance.

Avoid Commenting on Students' Bodies, Food, or Exercise Habits

Even well-intentioned comments can reinforce stigma. Avoid:

- Praising or criticizing students for their weight, eating habits, or physical activity
- Making assumptions about a student's health based on appearance
- Using food or exercise as punishment or reward

Instead, create a classroom culture where all students feel safe to eat, move, and exist without scrutiny.



Integrate Body-Positive and Size-Inclusive Messages into Curriculum

Across subjects, educators can challenge narrow beauty standards and promote body diversity. This might include:

- Featuring diverse body types in classroom materials, literature, and media
- Discussing how health is influenced by many factors – not just weight
- Highlighting the strengths and abilities of people in all body sizes

These messages help students understand that worth and health are not determined by appearance.

Be Mindful of How You Talk About Food, Weight, and Health

Students are always listening. The way adults talk about their own bodies, food choices, or exercise routines can shape how children view themselves. Consider the following practices:

- Encourage intuitive eating: Support students in honoring their hunger, fullness, and appetite without labeling foods as “good” or “bad.”
- Respect autonomy: Allow students to decide how much they eat and in what order, without commentary or pressure.
- Model balanced habits: Demonstrate regular eating, joyful movement, and body respect in your own behavior and classroom routines.
- Avoid promoting dieting: Discourage restrictive eating or weight loss as a goal for children and adolescents.
- Model respectful language: Avoid criticizing your own weight or appearance and that of other people. Talk about bodies, including your own, in a positive way.

These practices help students build a healthy relationship with food and their bodies – one rooted in trust, not control.

Promote Critical Thinking About Media and Cultural Messages

Teach students to question the messages they receive from advertising, social media, and pop culture. Encourage them to ask:

- Who is represented, and who is left out?
- What assumptions are being made about bodies, health, or success?
- How do these messages make me feel about myself and others?

Media literacy is a powerful tool for building resilience against weight stigma and unrealistic body ideals.

Ensure School Health Programs Focus on Well-Being, Not Weight Loss

School wellness initiatives should promote physical, emotional, and social health – not weight control. Effective programs:

- Emphasize movement for joy and energy, not calorie burning
- Encourage balanced eating without shame or restriction
- Support mental health, sleep, and stress management
- Avoid public weigh-ins, BMI report cards, or competitions based on weight change

When health is framed holistically, all students benefit, regardless of body size.

Reflect on Your Practices and Challenge Internal Bias

Preventing weight stigma also requires self-reflection. Ask yourself:

- Do I hold different expectations for students based on their size?
- Have I ever made assumptions about a student's motivation, health, or behavior because of their body?
- How might implicit bias influence my grading, discipline, or classroom interactions?
- How do I talk and think about my own body? Do I focus on my overall health or overall weight?

Challenging these patterns is about growth, not blame. By becoming more aware of our own beliefs and behaviors, we can create more equitable and compassionate learning environments.

07

Creating Inclusive Classroom Policies and Practices

Introduction

Creating a stigma-free classroom requires more than good intentions. It involves examining the systems, materials, and routines that shape students' daily experiences. When educators embed inclusivity into their classroom policies and practices, they help ensure that all students, regardless of body size, feel welcome, respected, and able to participate fully in school life.

One of the most impactful places to begin is with the health and physical education curriculum. These subjects often carry strong messages about bodies, health, and worth. Reviewing these lessons for bias is essential. Educators should ensure that health is presented as a multifaceted concept beyond something that can be measured solely by weight or appearance. Lessons should emphasize behaviors like movement, sleep, and emotional regulation, rather than focusing on weight loss or body transformation. Public weigh-ins, BMI tracking, and fitness competitions that reward thinness should be eliminated in favor of inclusive, supportive approaches to well-being.

Representation also plays a powerful role in shaping students' beliefs about themselves and others. Classrooms should include books, visuals, and learning materials that reflect a wide range of body types, abilities, and identities. Students are more likely to feel valued and capable when the curriculum reflects them as protagonists, leaders, and creators, rather than as side characters or cautionary tales. Visuals on classroom walls, in textbooks, and in digital content should challenge narrow beauty standards and celebrate body diversity.

Classroom culture is equally important. Establishing norms around kindness, respect, and inclusion helps create a learning environment where all students feel safe. This includes setting clear expectations that body-based teasing or exclusion will not be tolerated, and that every student deserves to be treated with dignity. Educators can foster empathy and accountability by incorporating discussions about the impact of words and actions, and by using restorative practices when harm occurs.

Physical comfort is another key consideration. Classrooms should be designed to accommodate a range of body sizes and needs. This might mean offering flexible seating options, ensuring that desks and chairs are accessible to all students, or advocating for uniforms and dress codes that are size-inclusive and do not disproportionately target students in larger bodies. Activities, field trips, and classroom routines should be planned with accessibility in mind, so that no student feels singled out or excluded because of their body.

When educators take the time to examine and adjust their classroom practices, they send a powerful message: every student belongs here. These changes may seem small, but they can transform how students experience school and how they see themselves.

08

Responding to Incidents of Weight-Based Bullying

Treat weight-based bullying as seriously as other forms of identity-based harassment

Ensure that weight-based bullying is explicitly included in school anti-bullying policies and reporting procedures. Students should know that harassment based on body size is not tolerated and will be addressed with the same urgency as other forms of discrimination.

Teach and model empathy and bystander intervention

Equip students with the tools to recognize weight-based bullying and respond effectively. Encourage them to speak up, support peers who are targeted, and seek help from trusted adults. Model compassionate responses and inclusive language in everyday interactions.



Involve parents and counselors when necessary

When incidents occur, collaborate with school counselors and caregivers to support the student who was harmed and address the behavior of the student who caused harm. Communication should be handled with care, centering the emotional safety and dignity of all students involved.

Include weight stigma education in professional development

Provide training for all staff on recognizing and addressing weight-based bullying. This should include information on implicit bias, inclusive language, and strategies for creating a supportive school climate for students of all sizes.



Use restorative practices to repair harm and build understanding

Move beyond punishment by facilitating conversations that help students understand the impact of their actions. Restorative approaches can include guided reflection, peer mediation, and opportunities to make amends in meaningful ways.

09

Supporting Students and Fostering Body Diversity



Help students value body diversity

Encourage conversations that show bodies come in many shapes and sizes, and that all bodies deserve respect. Shift the focus from appearance to function by celebrating what bodies can do: run, think, create, rest, and connect.

Affirm students for who they are, not how they look

Make it a habit to praise students for their effort, kindness, curiosity, and creativity. Avoid tying compliments or feedback to physical traits. Reinforce that their value is not dependent on body size or appearance.

Model inclusive attitudes

Students notice how adults talk about their own bodies and others'. Avoid negative self-talk, diet culture language, or jokes about weight. Speak with compassion and neutrality about food, movement, and health.

Collaborate with school counselors

If a student is struggling with body image, teasing, or internalized stigma, work with school counselors to provide support. Ensure students know where to go for help and that they will be met with empathy and understanding.

10

Resources for Educators

Continuing Education and Resources

Books

- Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture by Virginia Sole-Smith
- Intuitive Eating: A Revolutionary Diet Approach by Evelyn Tribole & Elyse Resch
- Decolonizing Wellness: A QTBIPOC-Centered Guide to Escape the Diet Trap, Heal Your Self-Image, and Achieve Body Liberation by Dalia Kinsey
- What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat by Aubrey Gordon
- Your Body is Not an Apology by Sonya Renee Taylor
- You Have the Right to Remain Fat by Virgie Tovar
- Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia by Sabrina Strings

Podcasts

- What is Weight Stigma? With Dr. Rebecca Puhl
- The Language of Weight Stigma (with Ragen Chastain)
- Rebel Eaters Club Podcast hosted by Virgie Tovar
- Fierce Fatty Podcast hosted by Vinny Welsby (they/them)
- Maintenance Phase hosted by Aubrey Gordon and Michael Hobbes

Documentaries

- Embodied
- Your Fat Friend

Organizations

- UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health
- Association for Size Diversity and Health
- National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance
- Obesity Medicine Association
- The Obesity Society
- Obesity Action Coalition

Support groups and online communities

- Fat Fridays Virtual Social Club
- ASDAH Events
- I Weigh Community
- Weight and Healthcare Newsletter by Ragen Chastain

For educators and healthcare professionals

- Healthcare professionals:
 - Massachusetts Medical Society – Weight Bias Resources
- Educators:
 - Weight Bias and Stigma in Schools (PDF)

11

Final Thoughts

feeling good
through
movement



Summary of key takeaways

Educators are uniquely positioned to shape how students view themselves and others academically, socially, and emotionally. Every day, in classrooms, hallways, and cafeterias, students are absorbing messages about what kinds of bodies are valued, respected, and included. By recognizing and addressing weight stigma, educators have the power to disrupt harmful narratives and replace them with ones rooted in empathy, equity, and belonging.

Creating a school culture that affirms all bodies doesn't just benefit students in larger bodies; it benefits everyone. When we promote respect, kindness, and inclusion, we foster environments where students feel safe to learn, express themselves, and grow. These values ripple outward, influencing peer relationships, classroom dynamics, and long-term self-worth.

The work begins with reflection. Consider how your own language, expectations, and classroom practices may unintentionally reinforce weight-based assumptions. Start conversations with colleagues about how to make your school more inclusive. Advocate for policies and curricula that reflect body diversity and challenge bias. And most importantly, continue learning, because the more we understand, the better we can support every student in feeling seen, respected, and valued.



Thank You

At Greaux Healthy, we are committed to fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and evidence-based understanding around health and well-being. This booklet is designed to support our shared mission of promoting health equity and reducing weight stigma in our communities.

We encourage you to use this resource as a guide to better understand how weight stigma affects individuals across all ages and backgrounds. Whether you're a healthcare provider, educator, parent, or community member, your role in creating inclusive environments matters.

If you have questions or would like to learn more about our outreach efforts, please connect with the Greaux Healthy team. Together, we can build a healthier, more compassionate Louisiana – where everybody is valued.

Thank you for being part of this important work!

– The Greaux Healthy Team at Pennington Biomedical Research Center

Contact Information

Phone 225-763-2500

Website www.greauxhealthy.org

Social Media



Address

6400 Perkins Road
Baton Rouge, LA 70808