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Body of Evidence

Childhood obesity is at the forefront of national discourse. Could this be the tide that reverses America's weighty legacy?

The much-publicized planting of the White House vegetable garden in spring 2009 was the first sign of something big to come. Not since World War II and Eleanor Roosevelt had crops of produce appeared on the presidential lawn. Besides First Lady Michelle Obama, the groundbreaking ceremony featured recently appointed Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, a proponent of sustainable living, and two dozen fifth-graders from a nearby elementary school who would tend and harvest the 1,100-square foot plot sprinkled with 55 varieties of vegetables, herbs, berries, honeycombs, and bees.

By February, Obama had turned her passion into a Cabinet-level cause, unveiling Let's Move!, a White House initiative that calls on everyone, from parents to policy-makers, to make the health of future generations a priority.

Every week since then, it seems like a new group, program, or campaign is being waged in the fight against childhood obesity. PepsiCo recently announced it would stop selling sugar-laden drinks in primary and secondary schools worldwide by 2012. And the new Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation—a consortium of nearly 80 U.S. retailers, food manufacturers, and nonprofits pledging to reduce 1.5 trillion calories from Americans' annual food consumption by 2015—was set to release a nutrition and exercise curriculum for elementary schools at press time.

It seems unfortunate that more than 30 years of studies,

warnings, and gloomy forecasts about the waning health of Americans hasn't elicited this kind of coordinated effort before now. Predictions that most adults will be overweight or obese by 2030, or that today's youth will have a shorter lifespan than their parents, is a call to action if there ever was one.

But when the White House speaks on an issue, it takes on national prominence and is no longer just a local or state problem, says Martin Gonzalez, deputy executive director of the California School Boards Association. "Having that level of support and recognition is incredibly important as people look into their own communities for change," Gonzalez says.

The good news, and the larger reason why this might be a turning point in America's battle with the bulge, is that most communities seem ready to move.

"It's all about demand and we have a grassroots understanding, almost a clamor, for better foods in schools," says Marci Kelly Scott, a registered dietician and board member of Michigan's Williamston Community Schools. "It's not something federal funding and attention is pushing, but teachers, parents, and communities—because they understand that physical activity and nutrition are important in school, important in life."

Not the first big push

In March, acting Surgeon General Steven K. Galson made his first stop in a whirlwind tour of West Virginia to tout a

new federal initiative tackling childhood obesity. Galson pointed to recent data analyses from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that indicated obesity rates were stabilizing, but not uniformly across all states. That data spotlighted Huntington, W.Va., as the fattest city in America.

This was in March 2008. Surprised?

If you are, it's understandable. One of President George

Starting places

Here are a number of things school boards can do in the fight against childhood obesity:

- Develop and implement nutritional standards for all competitive foods and beverages sold or served in schools.
- Ensure school meals meet federal nutritional guidelines.
- Develop, launch, and monitor pilot programs to extend school meal funding and expand opportunities for physical activity, including interscholastic sports, after-school use of facilities, physical activity clubs and programs, and walking and biking to school programs.
- Implement school policies to limit advertising of unhealthy products on or near schools.
- Decline offers from food and beverage marketers to donate equipment or sponsor before and after-school programs.
- Enhance the health curriculum to devote attention to energy balance, behavioral skills, nutrition, and physical activity.
- Conduct annual assessments of students' height, weight, and BMI—and make them available to parents.
- Develop or re-evaluate long-term transportation plans that set “active transportation” such as walking or biking as goals to improve.
- Support “walking school buses” and Safe Routes to School programs.
- Include physical education as a core requirement and set time standards.
- Adopt high-quality PE certification standards.
- Establish joint-use agreements enabling students and community members to use school facilities after school hours.
- Enforce and/or reinvigorate local wellness policies.
- Create edible school gardens, incorporating curriculum, instruction, and cooking into the program.
- Encourage integration of health education into other subjects.
- Support small farms and farm-to-cafeteria opportunities through procurement policies that favor local, healthy foods.
- Adopt a coordinated school health program that recognizes health promotion must occur on all levels (i.e., parents, community involvement) and incorporate other aspects (counseling, employee wellness) beyond nutrition and physical activity.
- Launch and maintain a school health council, comprised of school and community members who help guide and develop district goals and programs on wellness.

W. Bush's legacies is the No Child Left Behind Act, which many blame for taking the balance out of education in the first place, creating a culture where schools eliminated any subject or activity that wasn't tested.

Still, the Bush administration pushed the Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention Initiative. And before Bush, former President Clinton—shortly after his quadruple bypass surgery in 2004—joined forces with the American Heart Association to create the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

Then, of course, there is Healthy People 2010, which was originally Healthy People 2000, a national campaign launched in 1990 but stemming from a 1979 Surgeon General report that called for a “public health revolution” emphasizing prevention and health promotion.

America's heaviest hitters have long understood the collision course the U.S. is on unless the health of its population, particularly its youngest members, is diverted.

“It's not hard to make the case that, when children are either inadequately active or not eating healthfully, that there are associated health problems,” says Charlene Burgeson, executive director of the National Association of Sport and Physical Education. “But it seemed like, though people understood, the priority came to, ‘Well, that's important, but my child learning to read well or know science is more important.’”

Much as with the environmental movement, people are beginning to realize that altruistic endeavors can be economically sound ones, too. Consider the finding that severely overweight children miss four times as much school as their normal-sized counterparts. If that child missed just one day a month during the school year, it would mean an annual loss of \$28 million for a large system like New York City or a \$95,000 hit for an average-sized district in Texas.

It remains to be seen whether this latest federal effort will, in the First Lady's words, “solve” the epidemic. Let's Move! already has its share of skeptics.

“I'm afraid it's just more awareness but at a higher level,” says Keith Bakken, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance and a board member in the Mount Horeb School District. Unless some teeth are built into policies, Bakken worries this initiative won't live up to its name.

Comprehensive approach

One thing the Let's Move! campaign—and previously successful state and local ones—has in its favor is its comprehensive approach and active outreach to schools and district leaders.

And don't forget the media.

It's media attention, after all, that put Huntington on the map, thanks to an Associated Press story proclaiming it the fattest city in America—though local health officials are

quick to clarify the 2007 CDC figures the story was based on represent a five-county area surrounding the city.

In the reality-TV world, however, it's snazzier to single out a town, and the AP story no doubt drew the attention of "Naked Chef" Jamie Oliver, whose "Food Revolution" series is popular in Britain. After Oliver solicited the city to be his first American stop for the show, which challenges communities and families to change the way they eat, the Cabell County School District agreed to give him and a production crew access to its cafeterias.

As the footage shows, it was not always a pleasant or pretty experience. On TV, Central City Elementary cook Alice Gue appears snippy and sullen as Oliver chides the staff for using processed food like chicken nuggets and potato pearls. The latter especially incensed Oliver, prompting him to tell the cameraman later that it angered him and it should anger parents, too.

Gue doesn't disagree. "We know that fresh food is better, and we were on board with that," she says. "But the thing that most people don't understand is we operate under a lot of guidelines and restrictions."

In school cafeterias, cooking is less of an art than a science. Food portions must be exact, nutrient content must be analyzed, head counts must be tabulated, paperwork must be filed, and waste minimized. Most districts expect child nutrition programs to be self-supporting operations—which frankly is part of the problem, says Margo Wootan, nutrition policy director for the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest.

"We don't charge the math or science department for overhead and employee health insurance, and we shouldn't charge food service for that either," she says.

But few beyond school food nutritionists understand the National School Lunch Program, which President Truman launched as a matter of national security after learning many young men drafted for World War II later were rejected due to malnutrition. Ironically, in March, a report from a group of retired military generals said national security is again in jeopardy, since more than a quarter of eligible recruits are too fat for duty. The generals pointed a finger directly at school lunches as the culprit.

Indeed, it's not that schools have been overlooked or forgotten in the discourse over childhood obesity. It's just that, more often than not, they are cast as perpetrators instead of as partners in addressing the problem.

That's not the case, says Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association. Bryant points to the proposed reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act, which Congress is considering this fall, as an example. The legislation authorizes a 6-cent increase per lunch for school districts, but the actual cost to properly implement the standards is closer to 11 cents per meal. If the reauthorization passes in its current form, she says, dis-

tricts will continue to struggle to keep school meals affordable for students who don't qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

"Local school boards across the nation are acutely aware of the importance of ensuring that children have access to healthy and nutritious food, and officials at the local and state level already have taken a number of innovative steps to improve school nutrition programs," Bryant says. "These successes have proven that awareness and education—not federal mandates—will spur parents and communities to make the changes that are absolutely necessary for long-term success."

From victim to victory

Huntington's experience has shown that to be true. Schools and communities have the power to recast themselves as victors instead of victims.

Contrary to his show's title, Oliver's visit was less of a revolution for the town than was the CDC report, which prompted everyone from the local university and hospitals to the YMCA and school system to get serious about leading citizens to a healthier lifestyle.

None of those efforts appeared on Oliver's show, which made some Huntington folks unhappy. However, most felt the series was a positive experience because it helped launch new programs and practices.

The Cabell County School District, for instance, adopted many of Oliver's recipes, including an ingenious sauce of squash, zucchini, carrots, onions and tomatoes that serve as the foundation of dishes like spaghetti and Sloppy Joes. But more ambitious items like fresh baked bread and homemade yogurt were abandoned, either because they were impractical or unilaterally panned by their picky eaters.

"I don't think Jamie Oliver has any idea what institutional cooking is," says Allen Kaplan, assistant principal at Huntington High School. "We've got to get 1,000 meals out in two 25-minute lunch breaks. We don't have the luxury of making things to order."

Nor do they have the luxury of blowing past budgets or federal standards, both of which Oliver did, proving revolutions are harder to achieve in schools—though not impossible.

So what can schools and school leaders do?

First, recognize that a problem exists, says Molly Helm, a board member in Oklahoma's Enid Public Schools. Second, resist the urge to pass the buck.

"If schools blame the parents and the parents blame the schools and we blame the government for not giving enough money, we'll never get anywhere," Helm says. "It doesn't always take money. Sometimes it takes someone with a passion and creativity to say 'we can do better for our kids.'"

Making better choices

By all accounts, Helm—who'd made vegetables a regular

part of her two teens' diet and ran a half-marathon three months before her 42nd birthday—is definitely one such person. She talked about the issue frequently at board meetings and informal gatherings, and in so doing found others just as concerned about student health. One was the district's new superintendent, Shawn Hime, who agreed to launch an Eat Smart committee that drew from the community's diverse skills and perspectives.

From the chef at the local country club to the dietician at a national food manufacturer, the committee's first step was as basic as going around the table, gathering ideas each thought could be implemented under current constraints.

"It seems like a task that's too big to take on, especially when schools are being asked to do more with less," says

Amber Fitzgerald, the district's communications director. "But it became clear there were a lot of things we could do."

Among them: Adding yogurt to breakfast, cutting back on starches, and not making dessert a daily offering, especially at elementary schools. The district is testing out healthier menu items as part of its summer nutrition program, surveying students to find out what they like.

"Our goal is to offer better choices, not fewer choices," says Fitzgerald. "It's easy to go in and say we'll eliminate this, but it's better to teach them how to make smarter decisions, because if they do that for lunch they might do that for dinner, too."

In 2010-11, Enid plans to work with different vendors on a farm-to-school program, part of a \$40 million U.S.

Collaboration achieves greater, lasting success

Though the California School Boards Association has guided districts to incorporate health and wellness into the educational experience for more than a decade, Deputy Executive Director Martin Gonzalez demurs at any suggestion that his state is unique.

"I don't think California is an anomaly when it comes to the care and concern school leaders have for the children in their district," he says. "Some of the effort, momentum, and reaching out to partners, however, may be ahead of the curve."

California has been long considered an oasis of healthy living—think aerobics classes, Smoothie bars, and mountain biking, industries all spawned in the Golden State. Gonzalez says early-adopter schools quickly realized they couldn't afford to be islands and expect transformational change.

"When we started this work 10 years ago, every conversation ended at the same place: 'We can't do it alone,'" he says. "Now that's the beginning of every conversation."

Indeed, collaboration is one of the most consistent themes in the continual economic downturn. Dwindling resources are forcing districts and organizations to find partners to do more—and better.

"Leveraging partnerships to support all priorities is more important than ever

for school districts in this time of high-stakes accountability and reduced finances," says Brenda Z. Greene, NSBA's director of school health programs. "For example, local hospitals have dieticians who might advise on improving the nutrition quality of school meals."

In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and television personality Rachel Ray are pushing "learning gardens" on or near school sites to teach kids how to grow and prepare their own food. The program will be funded with \$500 to \$1,000 mini-grants this fall, and a teen intern program will tend the gardens during the summer.

Like New York, Baltimore recently appointed its first "food czar." Holly Freishtat will work with nonprofits, businesses, and municipal agencies to build partnerships and change policies regarding healthy eating. Research from the Baltimore City Food Policy Task Force shows nearly two-thirds of adults and 40 percent of high school students are overweight or obese.

Enlisting city students to develop an ad campaign promoting balanced diets, expanding farmers markets, and eliminating food deserts—in pockets of Baltimore where fresh food and supermarkets are not available—are some of the task force's recommendations and charges for Freishtat.

And in Huntington, W.Va., the partnerships abound.

St. Mary's Medical Center, working with the school district, provides free cholesterol and blood screenings to elementary and middle school students. Those at risk of developing obesity-related diseases are referred to a 12-week weight loss program that teaches the fundamentals of nutrition and exercise.

The YMCA offers free and reduced-price memberships and programs to families and school employees. Marshall University's School of Medicine and College of Health Professions helps schools develop curriculum and provide instruction on fitness, nutrition, and wellness. Cabell Huntington Hospital also has spent more than \$150,000 to provide training and kitchen equipment to the Cabell County School District.

Even school board Vice-President Suzanne Oxley gets into the mix. A certified yoga instructor, she leads classes at the district's central office every week for employees.

"From the 'Food Revolution' to Obama, there's so much attention being paid to childhood obesity, and I think it's wonderful that all of these players are seeing the light at the same time," Oxley says. "This isn't a Huntington problem, but a national problem, and we need to address it."

Department of Agriculture (USDA) initiative that is an element of the proposed child nutrition reauthorization. The act would nix all but skim or 1 percent milk and empower the USDA to set limits on sodium, fat, and food served outside the cafeteria in vending machines and through school fundraisers.

“We’re not asking schools to take on a new responsibility. We’re just asking them to change the way they do it,” Wootan says. “Some things like physical education need more teachers, more space. It’s hard to build.”

If school officials look around, Burgeson says, they will find that they can do more for kids with what they have. She believes schools should provide a wide range of activities to appeal to as many kids as possible.

“The ‘big picture’ idea is to implement a comprehensive school physical activity program,” she says. “That means finding ways before, during, and after school to help kids engage in physical activity.”

As examples, she says, you can encourage kids to walk

or bike to school when it’s safe or feasible. Allow students to use some of their lunch period to shoot hoops in the gym, ride a stationary bike, or walk along an outside path. Some schools, Burgeson notes, are incorporating schoolwide activity breaks, led by video or over the PA system.

During class time, encourage teachers to integrate physical activity into instruction. Having students graph their heart rates after physical activity is an easy way to illustrate math or science in action. Many schools have sports teams, but not all students are interested in the traditional offerings. Try introducing dance, yoga, or a running club.

“Some things require proper supervision or volunteers, so creativity is key here,” Burgeson says. “Utilize your resources. There are so many champions for fighting obesity, and many of them don’t mind giving their time or talent.” ■

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Resources

- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (www.rwjf.org), in collaboration with 11 policymaking organizations, including the National School Boards Association, developed the Action Strategies toolkit, which includes sample policies and strategies to address childhood obesity.

- NSBA’s School Health division (www.nsba.org) maintains a database of resources, sample policies, and research on childhood obesity.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://cdc.gov>) has numerous resources on this topic, including a self-assessment and planning tool.

- The National Association of State Boards of Education (www.nasbe.org) has a state school health policy database guide.

- The California School Boards Association (www.csba.org) has published a number of guides for school leaders on creating healthy environments.

- The California Department of Health Services, through its Project Lean (www.californiaprojectlean.org), has many resources to help school board members, including a guide to developing a nutrition policy, engaging school boards and parents, lesson plans, and even recipes.

- The Alliance for a Healthier Generation (www.healthier-generation.org) also has a framework for school districts.

- The American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org) has a practical guide that includes a five-step approach to planning, implementing, and maintaining a school health council.

- North Carolina’s Healthy Schools Initiative, a collaboration of the State Department of Public Instruction and State Department of Health and Human Services (www.nchealthyschools.org), also has a guide on developing school health advisory councils.

- The nonprofit Action for Healthy Kids (www.actionforhealthykids.org) has a wellness policy development tool.

- For the gold standard in wellness policies, visit the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org), which developed model policies incorporating the latest research, existing practices, and federal standards.

- The Texas Department of Agriculture revamped its nutrition guidelines in an initiative called Square Meals (www.squaremeals.org).

- The Pennsylvania Department of Education’s nutrition staff and faculty have developed a free, downloadable health curriculum

available at www.education.state.pa.us.

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture launched its HealthierUS School Challenge (www.fns.usda.gov), which offers financial rewards to schools that meet the standards of its four-tiered program to improve school food nutrition, recess time, physical education, and nutrition education.

- National Association for Sport and Physical Education (www.aahperd.org/naspe) has piggybacked on the First Lady’s initiative with its Let’s Move in School campaign, providing tools and resources to support school-based physical activity and education.

- The Safe Routes to School National Partnership (www.saferoutespartnership.org) is a network of more than 400 organizations, schools, and government agencies working to find and share best practices on providing safe walking and biking routes to schools.

- The Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation released *Be Well*, a book with tips from moms on how they got their children to adopt healthier habits, like eating more veggies and watching less television. The book is available for free download at www.bewellbook.org and for a minimum cost at Amazon.