



Newsmakers: Robert Harrison

*The CEO of the
Alliance for a
Healthier Generation
talks about his
organization's efforts
to end childhood obesity*

When you want to focus attention on a growing epidemic, it never hurts to have a former president in your corner. Bill Clinton and the American Heart Association joined forces last year to form the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a partnership that is focused on putting an end to childhood obesity by 2010.

The alliance's first major move was to secure an agreement from the nation's three largest soft-drink manufacturers—Cadbury Schweppes, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi Co.—to remove all high-calorie, sugary drinks from school vending machines by the 2009-10 school year. The decision, expected to affect at least 35 million school-age children, was announced in May.

Another key piece of the alliance's work is its Healthy Schools Program, which is designed to recognize schools that meet standards of nutrition, physical activity, and staff wellness. Almost 300 schools from 13 states—Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—are participating in a pilot program this year.

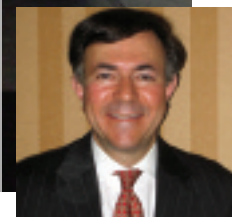
Editor-in-Chief Glenn Cook recently interviewed Robert S. Harrison, the alliance's chief executive officer, just prior to a summit at the Clinton Library to kick off the Healthy Schools Program. Harrison retired as a partner and managing director of Goldman Sachs & Company three years ago and started his work with the Clinton Foundation following the 2004 Democratic presidential primaries. He joined the alliance earlier this year as CEO.

Above: Former President Bill Clinton speaks at a public school in New York City. Calling it a national epidemic, Clinton announced the launch of a 10-year initiative to combat childhood obesity. Inset: Robert Harrison, CEO of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.



Given your background, why did you become involved in the alliance?

The short answer is that I have spent 22 years on Wall Street as an investment banker and corporate lawyer. I knew at some point that I was going to focus on getting back to public service activities. At the same time, I have three children (ages 7 to 11), so I have seen



this up close. My kids are very active and don't have these issues, but I see it with some of their classmates. This is real.

The announcement from the three soft drink manufacturers was the alliance's first big splash, but it has resulted in some confusion for school districts that think they are required to participate. The guidelines affect only private industry, not the schools themselves. Correct?

We're not an advocacy group in the sense that we are trying to lobby for government changes. We are seeking voluntary agreements with business and industry to move the needle in a positive way. This is not a legislative action against the schools.

Agreements with soft drink makers have been a boon to many districts. What do you say to schools who believe this agreement could hurt them financially?

The kinds of beverages that are included in what is permitted under the guidelines are designed to be revenue neutral. We recognize that schools rely on this revenue, and the agreement was not designed to restrict what's available without regard to the economics of schools. We're not here to hurt schools.

How are you working with other segments of the food and beverage industry to promote your cause?

We've decided to take an integrated approach. When we were negotiating our deal with the beverage industry, or when we're trying to create buy-in clubs where schools can get better purchasing power for food or athletic equipment, or when we're talking to sporting goods companies and fitness clubs about making a contribution, it's all interrelated. And the prime audience is the schools. That's where the kids are.

We have discussions ongoing now with snack food companies that fill up vending machines and sell in the cafeteria lines as well. We're really focused on all of the industry groups that play a role in the health of kids.

One of your largest partnerships is with Nickelodeon. What does that involve?

One half of the obesity problem is certainly the lack of physical activity—the focus on the PlayStations and the computers and the TV set. At the same time, those outlets are ways to reach kids with your message, so we're trying to use them to show kids that healthy lifestyles are cool.

The partnership with Nickelodeon involves a monthly reality show, the "Let's Just Play Go Healthy Challenge." It involves four role models, each of whom has taken on a mission to be essentially a change agent by working toward a goal that is health oriented. We had 2 million kids watch the show when it launched on April 30, and it was the number one show for kids 6 to 11 that week.

The second part of this is the "Worldwide Day of Play" on Sept. 30. We're using the show to drive kids from their TV set to sign up online (www.nickjr.com) and pledge to get healthier.

We're working with our American Heart Association affiliates all over the U.S. to get people to take the pledge and make a commitment to a healthier lifestyle. Within 24 hours of the first show airing, 40,000 kids visited the website; another 40,000 downloaded the information to take the pledge.

The alliance's Healthy Schools Program, which includes schools from 13 states, was launched at a summit in late July at the Clinton Library in Little Rock. How were the pilot schools selected, and what is the program designed to do?

The program is the result of a four-year grant that we received from another partner, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Phase I is a pilot program involving 285 schools around the U.S. that we hope to roll out to thousands of schools over the years. We placed a significant focus on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographic distribution in selecting the pilot schools.

We're trying to create a criteria-based recognition program that will create standards along three lines: nutrition, physical activity, and staff wellness. We're trying to have healthier foods available to kids during the school day and after the school day. We're trying to encourage physical activity both in school and after school, both on the part of the students and the staff. Schools that participate and are certified will receive gold, silver, and bronze medals at the end of the year.

A large part of our focus over this first year is evaluation of outcomes. We want to be sure that we know what is working and what is not before we roll it out to a larger number of schools.

That's the shape of this entire first year for the alliance. We want to know we're doing it right. ■