

A “Growing” Problem

Summary

Childhood obesity in America is on the rise, in fact, in the last 20 years the percentage of overweight children has doubled, and about 9 million American children over age 6 are obese. Furthermore, the average child spends 7.5 hours a day engaged in entertainment in front of the television. What has happened to the days when children were desperate to escape to the outdoors?

But in this same vein, the number of fast food options are on the rise and the number one meal served in schools today consists of “chicken fingers” and “french fries.” We would like to assert that changing the food options in schools will eliminate many of the contributors to obesity in children by educating our young people about the agricultural process and food production. In localizing food efforts to the school campus via options like a school garden or greenhouse, students can learn directly about food harvesting and healthy, fresh options whether or not they can afford these options at home.

The Problem

- What can schools be doing to combat the rise of childhood obesity in America today? What can we be growing to fight our “growing” problem?

Background

- During the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States and rates remain high. In 2010, no state had a prevalence of obesity less than 20%.
- The percentage of overweight children has more than doubled in the past 20 years from 6.5% in 1980 to 15.3% in 2000. About 9 million American children over age 6 are obese.
- Obesity is a major contributor to type 2 diabetes in children and can lead to serious health consequences including but not limited to heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, sleep apnea, and kidney damage.
- Causes of childhood obesity include lack of daily, and quality physical activity, increase of sugary foods and limited access to healthy foods, and increasing portion sizes.
- Another factor contributing to childhood obesity is the length of time children 8-18 years of age spend using entertainment media. The average 8-18 year old spends 7.5 hours a day engaged in front of the TV, playing video games, using the phone/ cell phone, and etc.
- The Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that children ages 6-17 should actively participate in an hour (60 minutes) or more of physical activity and engagement each day
- The number one meal served to children in schools is “chicken fingers” and “french fries”. Processed food is much cheaper to serve than fresh produce
- In 2009 the American Diabetic Association found that 94% of school lunches failed to meet the US Agriculture Department’s regulatory standards.
- Offering better breakfast options in schools have been linked to increases academic achievement, decreases disciplinary problems, and decreases in childhood obesity.

Our Position

We feel the issue of childhood obesity stems from a lack of knowledge concerning the long term health consequences in addition to lack of opportunities for to student to engage with making healthy food choices. By incorporating fresh food, grown on site, into the school menu, students who may not otherwise be able to afford healthy options can learn about food choices as well as the process of growing food for themselves. Furthermore, we would like to assert that all students, regardless of financial situations, will benefit from the incorporation of learning about the agricultural process, positive and negative food effects, and the importance of physical activity directly into the curriculum.

We would propose that if childhood obesity continues at the current rate, the documented health issues which arise as a result of this problem will continue to plague the American public. These health problems are largely preventable through the education of our young people. We are actively doing them a disservice by not teaching them in the school environment about the importance of food in their lives.

Policy Options

- Schools will transition to offering more fresh food options including those which will be grown on site. Through growing the food on campus, students will be accountable for their food choices and engaged in the cultivation process making them more aware of agricultural endeavors.
- Physical activity should increase as a critical part of the school day. Teachers should be required to provide documentation that each student is meeting their health needs through specific activities. Wellness classes will also be required through curriculum changes and specific emphasis to more thoroughly educate young people about food choices and consequences of weight related health problems.
- No action

Advantages and Disadvantages

- In regard to the first policy option, advantages and disadvantages would include...
 - Over time, with this policy we could effectively combat childhood obesity and increase education around healthy food options.
 - Parents and tax payers would no longer feel concern over the safety of the food their child is consuming in schools.
 - This policy option would be the most expensive for schools to adopt, however feel that over time they would actually a reduction in food cost because of the localization of food services directly to the school.
 - This may be impossible for some schools to adopt due to location or environment.
- In regard to the second policy option, advantages and disadvantages would include...
 - This would not necessarily provide students with better food options while at school although combating obesity.
 - This policy will increase students levels of physical activity and create accountability for school systems to support effective physical education and student health.
 - This policy will have some cost because of the initial curriculum re-mapping, however, it would be lower in cost than the first policy option.

- With the increasing number of academic standards, it may be difficult to implement this program into the already crowded school day.
- In regard to the third policy option, advantages and disadvantages would include...
 - Childhood obesity will continue to effect our children ultimately raising the expenses of our health care system to provide for the health consequences of weight gain over life time.
 - This policy would not be expensive to implement or cause any tax increases because it is reflective of what we are are spending now.

We Would Recommend

It is with careful deliberation that we would recommend the first policy option. This option would provide students with healthy food choices through sustainable efforts and fight the effects of childhood obesity through education and accountability. Students do not necessarily choose the best food options for themselves at all times, we feel it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that students have access to healthy food. Although this policy will be expensive to implement, over time we feel the benefits would far out weight the cost and end up costing less.

References

A growing problem. (2012) Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/problem.html>

We looked to this website for research on the causes of childhood obesity, and what schools could be doing differently to change this epidemic.

Cline, K. et. al. (2005) Child Obesity in Indiana: A Growing Public Policy Concern. Center for Evaluation & Education Policy. Retrieved from http://ceep.indiana.edu/projects/PDF/PolicyBrief_Childhood_Obesity.pdf

This policy brief gave us some background on the issue of childhood obesity in America, as well as internationally. We looked to this policy brief for numbers regarding an increase in childhood obesity over the years.

Wantanabe, T. (2012). New program offers breakfast in L.A. classrooms. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/30/local/la->

This article emphasizes the importance of eating breakfast. Interviews a school in L.A. that is implementing a new breakfast program for students—and explains that breakfast has led to few discipline problems, less obesity, and fewer trips to the school nurse.