

Perspectives: Advocating for Physical Activity in Schools -- The Politics and the Policy

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Overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions and have become one of the most critical health issues for our nation. Overweight is an issue for all age groups, all races, and all socioeconomic levels. Sixty percent of adults in the United States are overweight (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1999). Our children are following in our footsteps: there are twice as many overweight children and three times as many overweight teens today as two decades ago. If this trend is not slowed or reversed, it could eliminate the progress we have made in reducing the burden of weight-related chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and several forms of cancer.

The causes of overweight and obesity are multifaceted. Both behavioral and environmental factors contribute to the rise in overweight children. Societal changes have reduced opportunities for physical activity. There are fewer options for children to be active in their neighborhood due to safety issues or lack of parks, sidewalks, or bike lanes. Only 64 percent of high school students report participating in vigorous physical activity for at least 20 minutes on three or more days of the week (Grunbaum et al. 2002).

The solution to the overweight crisis is simple: eat less and move more. Effecting change, however, is not that simple. Why are children not more active? Barriers can be found at every turn. Children do not have safe places to play and be active; families are not active together; communities do not have adequate parks, bike lanes, or sidewalks; and schools have forsaken physical activity in pursuit of academics.

In response to the epidemic of overweight, three state plans have been developed by the North Carolina Division of Public Health. The North Carolina Task Force for Healthy Weight In Children and Youth developed *Moving Our Children Toward A Healthy Weight* (<http://www.nchealthyweight.com>).



Two plans were created through the Eat Smart, Move More . . . North Carolina initiative (<http://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com>): the *North Carolina Blueprint for Changing Policies and Environments in Support of Healthy Eating* and the *North Carolina Blueprint for Changing Policies and Environments in Support of Increased Physical Activity*. All three of the plans indicate the role that schools must play in addressing the issue of overweight in children, namely, more physical activity during the school day.



As a result of the heightened awareness of the need for more physical activity for children, advocates proposed new policies for the state school board's consideration. One proposal was a Healthy Active Children Policy, which would require elementary schools to offer 150 minutes a week of structured physical education classes. Middle schools would have to offer 225 minutes per week. That averages out to 30 minutes a day for elementary schools and 45 minutes a day for middle schools. Also on the table was a second proposal that asked for the same number of minutes of physical activity, but some of those minutes could be overseen by classroom teachers, rather than by certified physical education teachers.

What ensued was an interesting debate over local control, funding, and children's health. There was little disagreement among state school board members about the benefits of physical activity for children. State Treasurer Richard Moore, a state school board member, declared passionately that physical activity is too important to ignore: "not getting enough math and art may make you a little ignorant, but it will not kill you. Not having enough physical activity contributes to chronic diseases that can kill you." The issue of physical activity's relationship to good health was not debated. However, in the end, the board stopped short of passing mandated recommendations for physical activity in schools. They indicated that the control of how many minutes each subject is taught is under local school board authority. They said that they did not

have mandates for other subjects, and they were not going to start with physical activity. Other opposition to the policy was related to funding. Mandating the increase in physical activity will, of course, require funding, so additional sources of funding must be identified.

On January 9, 2003, the state school board passed a version of the Healthy Active Children Policy that retained local control. The fact that they passed a version of the Healthy Active Children Policy without delay sent a message to local schools about the importance of physical activity for all children. The following is provided as an overview of the policy that can be accessed on-line at <http://sbepolicy.dpi.state.nc.us>.

Local School Health Advisory Committee:

In order for this policy to be fully implemented by the 2006 – 2007 school year, schools should:

- establish and maintain local School Health Advisory Councils to represent the eight components of a coordinated school health program. (Information about school health councils can be found at <http://www.nchealthyschools.org>. NC Healthy Schools and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) will be providing workshops on School Health Advisory Councils this coming year.);
- conduct a needs assessment on health services and programs;
- provide an action plan to the North Carolina DPI by July 15, 2004; and
- provide progress reports by July 15, 2005 and 2006.

In addition, the annual report will contain the number of minutes provided for children in physical education and in physical activity yearly.

Physical Education / Physical Activity:

Each school district shall require students enrolled in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and grade levels up to middle school to participate in physical activity as part of the district's physical education curriculum.

- Elementary schools should consider the benefits of having 150 minutes per week and secondary schools should consider the benefits of having 225 minutes per week of physical activity that will include a minimum of every other day of physical education throughout the 180-day school year. (NC DPI has demonstration schools and other

models for schools to refer to for ideas. The 2001 demonstration schools are located on their Web site at http://www.ncpublicschools.org/educators/pe_demos2001.html.)

- The physical education course is defined and should be the same class size as other regular classes.
- Appropriate amounts of recess and physical activity will be provided for students and for duration sufficient to provide a significant health benefit to students.

Recess:

Structured recess and other physical activity shall not be taken away as a form of punishment.

Coordinated School Health Programs:

The State Board of Education shall make available to each school district a coordinated school health model and training opportunities which provide for coordinating the following eight (8) components: safe environment; physical education; health education; staff wellness; health services; mental and social health; nutrition services; and parent/family involvement.

So, what does this policy mean to the children of North Carolina? Although some advocates of the proposed policy were disappointed, most realize that there is an opportunity for the Healthy Active Children Policy to have a positive impact on the health of North Carolina's children. Local school systems are now mandated to have local School Health Advisory Councils. School Health Advisory Councils serve in an advisory role to the superintendent and local school boards to provide sound and expert advice around health issues for children. Local advocates for more physical activity must seek every opportunity to voice their opinions to their local council. This provides an opportunity for parents and community leaders to become involved and help their local schools meet the recommended requirement for physical activity.

There are already successes at the local level. Since the passing of the Healthy Active Children Policy, three local school systems have passed policies requiring the recommended amounts of physical activity for elementary and middle school students.

Addressing the issue of childhood overweight is a daunting task. Schools cannot be asked to carry the burden alone. Preventing overweight will take commitment from families, communities, society, and, of course, schools. It will take all of us working together to fully address this epidemic.

The opinions and viewpoints expressed in this article are the opinions and viewpoints of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and viewpoints of the individuals and organizations who support FFCI.

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