

# The School As a Contributing Factor to Adolescent Obesity

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- Many people do not consider childhood obesity to be anything but a cosmetic problem.
- Adolescent obesity is thought to be a contributing factor to other problems like relationships, bullying and poor self concept.

# Obesity is Dangerous and Expensive

- In 2001, the Surgeon General announced that obesity and overweight cost U.S. taxpayers \$117 billion per year in direct health care costs and indirect costs such as lost wages
- The Surgeon General has established reduction of obesity as a national goal.
- This is similar to the national attention and subsequent systemic public health campaign that over time has changed the impact of tobacco on the nation's health.
- How do schools contribute to the problem

# A Day at School With Joe

- Joseph wakes up at 6:15 and statistics suggest he will probably not have breakfast. (In Florida only 46.6% of students eat breakfast.)
- He will shower get dressed walk to the corner and wait for the school bus. He will get on and sit down for a 45-minute to an hour ride to school.
- At school Joseph will go to his locker then to homeroom where he will sit and watch the morning announcements on closed circuit television.

# A Day at School With Joe, cont.

- After homeroom Joe will walk to his first class and sit in one seat after another till noon.
- At noon Joseph will go to the lunchroom for a meal that may include a variety of choices of varying nutritional value. Lunch may well be at least partially provided by outside vendors who offer, pizza, fried chicken fingers, tacos, burritos, hamburgers etc. There are vending machines in the lunchroom and hallways of the school but Joseph cannot access them until 2:00 as a concession to reduce the amount of snack foods consumed on campus. After 2:00 Joe has access to a cornucopia of high sugar and salt snacks.

# A Day at School With Joe, cont.

- During his day he may go to a physical education class
- At the end of the day he will go outside when the bus bell rings and get on the bus for a 45-minute to an hour bus ride home.
- The school contributes to Joseph's possible weight problem by exposing him to too much of the wrong nutrition and too little physical activity during his school day

# A Day at School With Joe, cont.

- When he gets home Joe will watch TV, use his computer or play video games for 3 or more hours during the remainder of the day and night.
- Mom works outside the home so she gets to the house at 5:30 to 6:00 and is bushed. It is too late to start cooking so she has brought a bag of burgers or a pizza for dinner.
- After dinner it is homework, music and instant messaging till bedtime.
- As a result of his day at school Joe has gotten little physical activity, a mixed nutritional experience and gone home to more of the same.

# Vending Machines in Schools

- One of the most debated topics of late regarding schools and obesity is school vending machines and the choices contained in those machines
- many schools and school districts across the US are changing their policies regarding vending machines
- An American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Press Release, January 5, 2004, stated that school districts should consider restricting the sale of soft drinks to safeguard against health problems that result from over consumption
- The AAP policy statement points out that sweetened drinks constitute the primary source of added sugar in the daily diet of children, and that each 12-ounce serving of a carbonated, sweetened soft drink contains the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of sugar.

# The cost to schools

- The concept becomes a hard sell when schools see removing or restricting vending choices as a revenue loss.
- Some schools have changed selections in machines to offer water, milk and fruit while maintaining fewer unhealthy choices.
- There are mixed results but some schools don't lose revenue or some even increase.

# National Soft Drink Association

- The NSDA is fighting to maintain the market in schools.
- On its website they contend that soft drinks are a healthy part of a daily hydration program.
- They attempt to re-direct the conversation to the issue of decreased physical activity as the major cause of obesity in young people while pointing to the positive part soft drinks play in the daily hydration needs of healthy people.

# NSDA Continued

- Also on their website is the statement that “Soft drinks are a complement to many types of foods that together form a balanced diet.”
- They further contend that “...Consuming at least 67 ounces of fluid each day (even more for those who are physically active) is important to your health. Adults and children should consume a wide variety of fluids each day, including water, milk, juices, teas, sports drinks and soft drinks to maintain proper hydration.”

# NSDA Continued

- The ASDA rightfully points to the need for increased physical activity as a needed change in controlling obesity in school aged children but does not accept complicity in the problem.
- Clearly businesses that make or distribute soft drinks or snacks look to develop brand loyalty while maximizing profits in the current market so it is important to them to have a presence in the schools.

# Nutrition in the Schools

- Public schools have a part to play in adolescent nutrition in 3 basic ways:
  - The first way is in the area of the school nutrition program
  - the second way is access to vending machines that provide, sugar, salt and carbonation
  - the third way is through educational activities that prepares students to make informed decisions about nutrition and foods now and in the future.

# Nutrition in the Schools Continued

- Much of what is served in school lunchrooms is the result of standards set by The National School Lunch Program
- Of course while school lunch programs are largely the result of USDA requirements, what is served is also very much a product of parental involvement and student choice.
- School districts have to balance the need to control cost with the need to offer appealing choices students will select. In order to strike this balance between cost and choice school lunch programs often turn to outside vendors that will come to campus and provide chicken fingers, tacos, burritos, hamburgers etc.

# Physical Activity and Health Education

- There are pressures schools must respond to in order to be successful. Some of the pressure points are public demands, political demands (at the school, district and state level), and legal pressures (state, local, and federal). The result of these internal and external pressures often restricts adequate physical activity and health education offerings.
- . A very powerful example of these pressures is statewide testing. Some form of high stakes testing exists in nearly every state in the United States and impacts how schools are funded.
- In many states poor performance on Math, Science or Reading tests may result in dramatically lower funding to “failing” schools.

# Physical Activity and Health Education, cont.

- Due to the strong connection between physical activity and positive academic outcomes, sacrificing Physical Education and Health Education, traditional areas for dealing with life decisions including tobacco use, alcohol and weight management may be too great a sacrifice.
- While there is a call for increased physical activity to help reduce overweight among children, the activity should be focused more toward the goal of developing lifelong fitness.
- “Traditional phys-ed classes provide too little activity to too few students, offer little or no guidance for maintaining a healthful lifestyle, and can make less athletic children feel inadequate reducing their motivation to exercise now and later.

# Physical Activity and Health Education, cont.

- Most physical education experts agree that programs that focus on sport and competitive types of activities have fallen short of their goal to energize students to maintain an active healthy lifestyle.
- Need for a greater emphasis on lifelong fitness and health awareness
- Studies show that planned exercise is higher today than in the past but that “incidental” exercise has decreased. That is to say scheduled physical activities such as going to the fitness center have increased while walking to the store and walking to school have declined and much of that is due to the layout of residential areas, which are becoming more separated from stores and workplaces.

# Need for Research

- While the surgeon general called for us collectively to create more opportunities for physical activity at worksites and to make community facilities available and accessible for physical activity for all people, including the elderly, his remarks seemed directed more to the business sector.
- We should be looking for ways to create alternative partnerships to provide cooperative use of facilities between the larger community and schools to provide a safe environment for physical activity.
- Lunchrooms need to become areas where children learn about healthy eating and make informed food choices that will provide the energy needed to be active learners.

# Need for Research Cont.

- Finally, Health Education must take a more prominent role in the curriculum rather than merely existing as intermittent embedded topics somewhere in the science or physical education program.
- In order to convince schools to re-invest in the health and physical education of our youth we must provide more data to support the argument that healthier, more active children are better students.
- I believe we must fight against allowing the discussion to focus on either physical activity or school nutrition/vending as the answer to the problem.

# Need for Research continued

- We should be looking at research that quantifies the revenue loss or gained by altering vending selections in schools
- We should be looking into the joint construction and use of school and public recreation facilities