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Childhood Obesity: A Growing Problem in Maryland*Better Food and More Exercise in Schools Key Strategies***Executive Summary**

Obesity has doubled in Maryland over the past 20 years, and nearly one-third of youth are obese, with significant consequences for health and the State's finances. Key strategies to combating childhood obesity include improving school lunches, mandating physical education in schools, making healthier food available in low-income neighborhoods, reducing watching of television and increasing access to parks. Maryland has already begun to use these strategies and can expand them statewide.

Introduction

Childhood obesity has become a national epidemic with significant consequences for both the physical and fiscal health of the United States. Obese youth are more likely than youth of normal weight to become overweight or obese adults and hence are more likely to be at-risk for disease normally associated with adults such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, various forms of cancer and osteoarthritis. There are also social and psychological problems associated with childhood obesity such as low-self esteem and stigmatization.

This issue brief examines childhood obesity in Maryland and then identifies key strategies to address the problem. It then explores how to build on efforts in Maryland to use these strategies.

Childhood Obesity in Maryland

In Maryland, obesity is an escalating concern, with the percentage of adults who are overweight or obese doubling over the last 20 years.¹ About 177,000 out of 615,000 Maryland children ages 10-17 years are considered overweight or obese. This is 28.8 percent of youth. Obesity is even more common among African-American youth, with a rate of 34.6 percent.²

In comparison to their counterparts nationwide, children in Maryland are less likely to be active for

four or more days per week. They are also less likely to attend daily physical education classes.³

Key Strategies in Combating Obesity

Experts have identified the five strategies to prevent and reduce childhood obesity.⁴

Incorporate and mandate physical education and activity in school curriculum

The more physically active children are the less likely they are to be obese. Children spend a significant amount of their time in school. As places of learning, which exert considerable influence over behavior, it is particularly important and appropriate that schools incorporate and mandate physical education to promote fitness among young people as part of the overall curriculum. Schools are also in a position to collect reliable data that can help administrators and policy makers understand the needs and fitness level of students.

It is important to advance physical activity behaviors that have proven effective. The 2010 White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity Report proposes that schools maintain strong physical education programs that engage students in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least 50 percent of the physical education class time.⁵ Schools should also employ qualified professionals who are trained in teaching methods that will engage students in physical education.

Finally, the best school-based programs, such as Eat Well and Keep Moving, combine academic and physical education lessons, with the goal of providing the skills and knowledge needed to eat well and exercise.

Maryland has taken positive steps with programs such as Get Fit Kids, modeled after Get Fit Maryland, which challenges Baltimore City elementary school students to walk 13,000 steps a

³ CDC, 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (June 2010).

⁴ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Childhood Obesity Strategy*: www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/strategy.jsp.

⁵ White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, *Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation* (May 2010).

¹ CDC, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System: www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/.

² National Survey of Children's Health (2007).



day. Maryland should also make efforts to pass requirements for body mass index screening of children and adolescents or other forms of weight related assessments in schools.

Ensure that schools provide healthy foods and beverages to students

The vast majority of students eat foods sold or provided at school. They also eat foods that are outside the school meal programs. Often these foods fall short of federal nutritional standards. A recent national study found that meals provided under the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program failed to meet the nutritional standards set by those programs. In order to contribute to healthy eating habits, meals provided at school must meet healthy nutritional standards.

Maryland has set nutritional standards for school lunches, breakfasts and snacks that are stricter than current United States Department of Agriculture requirements.⁶ Twenty states and Washington, D.C., have set such standards.

Baltimore City schools have also started an innovative program called No Thank You Bites, in which schools make available to students two-ounce samples of a new entrée, fruit or vegetable item. Students who try the sample are given star stickers. Each month the students with the star stickers are invited to meet with Chef Anthony Geraci, food service director for the school system, and other district food professionals to find out which of the entrees they preferred, the most popular is then made a part of the school menu. This inventive program not only aims for healthier food on the students' menu, but also involves them in the process.

Make healthy food available and affordable in all communities

Most low-income Americans tend to live in areas known as food deserts; these are neighborhoods that lack access to affordable healthy food. These communities are filled with an abundance of fast food restaurants, yet lack supermarkets and grocery stores that provide healthy food. Even when healthy food is available, the cost can be very high, which compared to the relatively cheap cost of fast food leaves inhabitants of these communities with little choice.

Access to supermarkets, grocery stores and specialty markets are important because consumers must be able to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables, which are known to have great health benefits. According to the 2010 White House report, some researchers have found significant association between the availability of food stores and adolescent body mass index (BMI). The research showed that in communities where chain supermarkets were available the adolescent BMI and overweight status were lower, while in communities with only convenience stores, the reverse was the case.

In the 2010 legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly passed House Bill 1135 also known as the Grocery Store Property Tax Credit Bill. The bill grants a property tax credit to grocery stores located in low-income neighborhoods. Maryland should also employ the Nutrition Environment Assessment Tool (NEAT), developed by Michigan's Department of Public Health, to help communities access the extent to which they promote and support healthy eating.

Reducing the number of hours children spend in front of computer or television screens

The more time children spend in front of the television and computer screen, the less likely they are to be physically active. Data shows that 39.1 percent of Maryland students are likely to watch television three or more hours a day compared to 32.8 percent for U.S. students as a whole. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children two years old and under not be exposed to television, and children over age two have limited daily media exposure consisting of 1-2 hours of quality programming.

Also, children are exposed to fast food advertising while watching television. Parents should make an effort to limit the amount of time children spend watching television or looking at their computer screens. Among the steps parents can take is removing television sets from children's bedrooms.

Make playgrounds accessible and safe for children

Efforts must be made to increase the number of safe and accessible parks and playgrounds especially in low-income neighborhoods. Parks and playgrounds should be safe and attractive for playing, and in close proximity to residential areas. Maryland is also taking positive steps with the passage of the Complete Streets legislation, which seeks to ensure that pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and commuters have safe access to a community's streets.

⁶ Trust for America's Health, *F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America Future* (2010).