
Cavalier Daily

A Weighty School Issue

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October 1, 2004

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Retrieved 10/11/04 from

<http://www.cavalierdaily.com/CVArticle.asp?ID=20755&pid=1192>

FOOD FOR thought: Coca-Cola has contracts with nearly half of this country's school districts. There are vending machines in almost 99 percent of high schools, nearly 75 percent of middle schools and 43 percent of elementary schools.

And 2 percent of school-aged children meet the food guide pyramid for all five food groups.

Many of us have more salient memories of the lunchtimes spent than the classrooms that housed us during our educationally formative years, and it becomes a little staggering to look back at the nutritional habits inculcated in us during that time. It's no small wonder that the number of overweight schoolchildren has tripled to 9 million, or 15 percent, since before we started school in the late 1980s.

That shocking figure is only the tip of the iceberg. According to Surgeon General Richard Carmona, one-third of all children born in 2000 will develop Type 2 diabetes during their lifetime, as well as the heart disease, strokes, kidney disease and blindness that accompany it.

He goes on to make a truly sobering point: Because of American toxic health habits, "We may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents." Quite a concept -- that science has defeated so many diseases and created life-saving therapies and surgeries, only to see life expectancy actually decrease under the effects of poor choices.

The Department of Health and Human Services released guidelines last summer to help individuals combat the obesity epidemic, and enormous strides will be made by their initiatives to partner with private groups such as the Girl and Boy Scouts, as well as to

encourage parents to increase their child's "health literacy" by helping them make smart food and exercise choices. Creating a language and discussion about the childhood obesity epidemic in this country is a momentous step in the right direction, but much more remains to be done. And the epicenter in the battle for children's waistlines is where they spend 2,000 hours a year: their schools.

But schools are increasingly being forced to sacrifice the health of their students in the pursuit of desperately needed funds. Physical activity has fallen by the wayside in our educational system; because schools are now dependent on the standardized test performance of their students for funding, gym class, which combats obesity and helps children focus but doesn't increase their test results, is being forfeited.

Cash-strapped schools across the nation have been turning to corporate sponsorship with soft drink makers and the like in recent years, and while such deals generate revenue for the schools, "It's really a bargain with the devil because what these districts essentially are doing is selling their students' health," according to Alex Molnar, head of the Arizona State University's Commercialism in Education Research Unit, which studies corporate involvement in schools. The research group recently documented the growth of these relationships, which increased 13-fold during the 1990s.

The USDA says that such commercial promotions "convey a mixed message. When children are taught in the classroom about good nutrition and the value of healthy food choices but are surrounded by vending machines, snack bars, school stores and a la carte sales offering low nutrient density options, they receive the message that good nutrition is merely an academic exercise that is not supported by the school administration and is therefore not important to their health or education." But the economic bottom line for suffering schools is that forgoing physical activity programs and hawking unhealthy nutritional habits is an unfortunate fiscal necessity.

Or is it? A report released last week indicates that these practices could be just as costly as their alternatives. According to a study published last Friday by Action for Healthy Kids (a coalition of more than 40 health and education agencies), obesity in students could be costing schools millions in operating costs. The study cites the example of attendance, in that "at least nine states that get state money based on student attendance are losing an estimated tens of millions of dollars because of absenteeism," which often results from the poor health that is symptomatic of nutrition problems. The group also notes that "unhealthy lifestyles by students and faculty lead to other hidden costs, from lower worker productivity to the added expenses of helping students who have fallen behind."

The implication of this study is that the long-term effects of the quick fix financial solutions that schools have been forced to adopt are devastating not only in health costs, but in fiscal costs as well.

It is shameful that such measures have become a financial inevitability for our school system. It is time to reprioritize when this country's children are being asked to pay the price of their own education with their health.

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