
EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

Thursday, May 10, 2007
Press Office, 202-226-0853

**Chairwoman McCarthy Statement at Subcommittee Hearing on
“Using School Wellness Plans to Help Fight Childhood Obesity”**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), chairwoman of the House Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, for a subcommittee hearing on “Using School Wellness Plans to Help Fight Childhood Obesity”*

I am so pleased to welcome you to the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities hearing on using school wellness plans to fight childhood obesity. I am even more pleased at the large level of interest in this hearing, both from my fellow Members of Congress and from those who wish to make the world a better place for our children. I am sorry that we could not accommodate everyone who wished to be on our panels, but I look forward to reviewing the submitted testimony as we move forward.

Childhood obesity is not only sweeping our nation, but is found in other industrialized nations such as Japan and emerging nations like China. As a nurse and Chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, I wanted to give this issue the attention it deserves. There is no need to discuss whether or not childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions in our nation: it has. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Academies of Science, among many other institutions, openly discuss our nation’s childhood obesity epidemic. In 2005, it was estimated that nearly 9 million children over age 6 were considered obese. Childhood obesity is found in all 50 States, in both young children and adolescents, affecting all social and economic levels. Low income communities tend to have the highest obesity rates due to factors such as a lack of access to affordable, healthy foods, lack of safe, available venues for physical activity, and a lack of education on nutrition and its benefits. Furthermore, it has been found that minority children are at greatest risk for obesity.

Clearly we can see that childhood obesity is a multi-faceted problem, and the solution cannot come from a single change in a child’s life. However, we can explore a single piece of every child’s life: school. Children spend the majority of their day in school, where they not only study the curricula but also absorb messages from their peers, their teachers, and the media. In addition, for many children, two-thirds of their meals happen at school along with the majority of their socialization and all too often, their lack of physical activity.

We are here today to explore how school wellness plans, established in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 for each Local Educational Agency participating in a program authorized by the RICHARD B. RUSSELL National School Lunch Act or the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, can be utilized to fight childhood obesity. Each Local Educational Agency was to establish a School Wellness Policy by the start of the 2006-2007 school year.

School Wellness Policies needed to include goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities designed to promote wellness, nutrition standards for foods sold in schools that are not federally reimbursable meals such as the slice of pizzas kids grab along with a soda, nutrition guidelines for reimbursable meals, which cannot drop below the USDA standards, a plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy, and a requirement for community involvement in the development of the school wellness policy.

Ideally, School Wellness Policies should look at our nation's youth holistically, addressing the school environment, life-skills courses, and physical activity. For example, for those students who struggle in the classroom because of learning disabilities it is important that they have time to participate in sports or physical activity during the school day, because these students tend to excel in sports or other physical activity. This is necessary to maintain a healthy self-esteem and the confidence to return to the classroom and face their personal challenges.

Although we need to establish a healthy environment in the schools, ideally the School Wellness Policy would be expanded to establish a Community Wellness Policy. You see, although there is great opportunity to address the health and wellness of youth in schools, if we do not address the health and wellness environment for youth outside our schools then there is a good chance we could lose the fight against childhood obesity. There is sufficient room in the legislation mandating these school wellness policies so that a policy can be crafted to suit the particulars of the community surround the school; the needs and opportunities for rural students differ greatly from those of suburban or urban students. However, across the board, we need to have in place School Wellness Policies which can work to educate our youth through experience on nutrition, physical activity, and other aspects of healthy living and wellness.

The School Wellness Policies are a piece of the culture change our nation is experiencing brought on in part by our nation's prosperity and the global knowledge economy. Today, many jobs tend to be at desks, sitting for hours without physical activity. The work day is long in this nation, leading to the abundance of fast food consumption. The lifestyle of citizens with multiple jobs or low-wage positions equally contributes to increased fast food consumption, lack of exercise, and other associated daily living challenges. Physical activity for health and recreation is often sacrificed for the basic needs of daily living. Change for adults is hard, but with children, if we start to educate our youth early, with continued reinforcement of healthy living and wellness, we will establish in our youth habits and values of healthy living and wellness for the future.

Today we will hear from a Member of Congress, experts in the fields of nutrition and physical education, an Emmy-award winning actor who now turns his energy to healthy food in schools, and most importantly, I think, a young woman who has through her love of running and exercise, campaigned at the local, state, and now the national level, to ensure that all youth have the opportunity to be physically active in their school day or school week. Thank you all for joining us today.

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