

Chandler Converse
Testimony to Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities
“Using School Wellness Plans to Help Fight Childhood Obesity”
Room 2175 Rayburn H.O.B
2:00 p.m.
May 10, 2007

Good afternoon Madam Chairwoman and other Members of Congress.

My name is Chandler Converse. I am a freshman at Pebblebrook High School in Cobb County, Georgia.

As a public school student, a young woman, and especially, as an American, I am honored to be speaking to you today.

I am here to briefly offer the youth perspective on an issue that won't quickly go away—a very real crisis for my generation—the epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States.

Last August, when I entered high school for the first time, the School Wellness Policy (required under the Child Reauthorization Act of 2004) was implemented for the first time. I was perhaps more aware than many of my peers, that the Policy was to take effect at the opening bell of the 2006-2007 school year--I am a person who helped to develop that same Policy.

As the student representative on my school district's Wellness Policy Committee, I looked forward to what I had anticipated to be an exciting new change, stemming from something for which I had worked so hard. However; when no official announcement of a new School Wellness Policy was made to students, I quickly discovered there perhaps was not much to become excited about.

Not only had most students been unaware of the newly developed guideline, I was astonished to witness evidence of the same oblivion at a physical education conference a few months later (November 2006). When I asked how many had heard that their various schools had a School Wellness Policy—only two hands in a room filled with 40 *physical education teachers* were raised!

I had been invited to serve—and still serve--on the Committee following news of the grass-roots initiative I had launched in 2004 to encourage schools to reinstate more physical education into the school day and to offer more nutritious food in school cafeterias and vending machines. I had begun the project I call “A.K.A.” (Athletics plus Kids equals Academics) because the link that I am trying to get educators, law makers, parents and health leaders to see is this: That increased physical activity (even 30

minutes a day) and better nutrition can, among other benefits, increase energy, self-confidence—possibly even test scores.

I had been informed in middle school that because (and I quote), “there is no room in the school day for a full year of Phys Ed,” (end quote) my fellow classmates and I only would be permitted one, nine-week grading period for Physical Education during the entire school year. Most of the students had very busy academic schedules and no matter how much I wanted a full school year of quality P.E.; I decided to try to evoke change through the system.

I am a runner. I like the energized feeling I get coming out of exercise and going into class. I believe that I am more alert because my circulation has increased and there is fresh oxygen in my brain.

I began talking with other students, health professionals and more teachers. I’ve seen too many school lunch periods in which the longest lines are for the pizza, chicken wings and French fries. I’ve seen too many days in which students buy ice cream and chips instead of bringing a healthy lunch. This is a nationwide problem—it is not just my school district.

I decided to try to take my concerns and ideas for improvement before my district school board. I was not certain that a child would be permitted to speak to the board, but my mother agreed to take me to the next school board meeting and I did have the opportunity to address its members. I told them about the increased risk for children regarding life-threatening diseases like diabetes, heart disease and mental illness that are directly linked to overweight and obesity.

I told them that my generation may easily be the first to have a shorter life expectancy than our parents.

These are facts—supported by almost every major health organization in the United States, former and deputy Surgeons General, and leadership in the Department of Health and Human Services, among others.

These facts are scary. It’s going to take the adults of today—and possibly those of *my* generation—to stop the epidemic. This is not a quick fix—but it must begin now.

As a student, I am doing my best to try to understand the delay on the part of some schools, but it is difficult. I became the committee member that attended state and regional Wellness Policy teleconferences and other meetings and brought back reports to the committee. I was the member who addressed the first Wellness Policy Administrative Training for our district last October. Since then, I’ve heard very little about enforcement of the policy.

During the course of the Wellness Policy planning meetings I heard comments such as, “We don’t have time for recess. We don’t have room or the money to add more classes

or build a track or a playground—we need to get our test scores up.” I must share with you that I came away from many meetings thinking, “They just don’t get it. As students, we can sit still in class and be taught all of the core subjects in the world...but if we are not healthy enough to enjoy our lives, we can’t be all that we can be.”

I need to convey very strongly that the bureaucracy surrounding this crisis not only is chipping away at our health...it’s chipping away at our dreams.

I realize that the federal government has not dictated much to local school systems in the past, but the children of today cannot wait for state legislatures and individual school districts to hash out what should be obvious.

There is hope: my principals have agreed to replace some of the vending machine junk food with healthier snacks and my school superintendent appears to be a supporter of the Wellness Policy. Yet—like most traditional school cafeterias...most School Wellness Policies do not have enough REAL meat!

I have lots of ideas for improvement: I propose a national corporate and education summit during which schools, cafeteria vendors, soft drink and snack food companies could come together to improve the health of students and still allow for additional revenue for schools. I suggest smaller improvements such as opening school gyms a few evenings a week so that communities and families can come together for fitness in a fun and safe environment. “Brown Bag Lunch Days” to educate students, teachers and parents is another small idea...but it could help make students more aware of good nutrition.

I believe that kids have a voice. I am using my voice on behalf of America’s children to encourage everyone to take seriously, the well-being of this country’s children. I have written to almost all of Georgia’s 181 school superintendents. I have taken my words to health policy conferences, the media, state houses, and Capitol Hill.

I am calling upon educators, health leaders and policy makers. I also am issuing a challenge to the parents of America: We don’t raise ourselves! We need your guidance and your good example. Take a good look at your children. Those not old enough to command the steering wheel of a car certainly cannot drive *themselves* to the fast food joint!

We are your children! We are the products of our parents, our schools and our nation! While we are little...while we are growing...while we are in your care...we can only be as healthy as you allow us to be.

My generation is going to lead this country one day—soon. America cannot be strong if it doesn’t have strong, healthy, intelligent, and self-confident citizens—adults *and children*.

I believe that kids have a voice. Please make the Wellness Policies strong at the federal level so that school systems must comply. That way, kids will receive enough exercise in the safe environment they deserve. We will receive enough exercise to fill our lungs to *raise* our voices.

Yes...kids *do* have a voice.

I thank you for listening to mine.