



## Op-Ed Article

# Helping Our Kids Succeed in School, and in Life

The health of our children is in danger. Almost a third of children in North Carolina are overweight or obese. Recently, North Carolina was ranked as the 5th most obese state in the nation for youth ages 10-17. For the first time, adults have a longer life expectancy than their children. This is alarming.

Research shows that overweight and inactive children are more likely to become overweight adults. They are more likely to have high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes than their healthy weight peers.

Children themselves see overweight and obesity in a negative light. They view the consequence of being overweight as social discrimination. Overweight youth are victims of bullying and have a poor outlook on life. Youth obesity is associated with alienation and isolation, which can lead to lower self-esteem and depression. The effects from these can stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Schools are a logical place to address the rising rates of child obesity and overweight. After age five, children spend over half of their day at school or school-related activities. The school environment plays a huge role in shaping their eating and physical activity habits.

North Carolina has laws for what foods can be sold in cafeterias starting in the 2008-09 school year for elementary schools. The NC Nutrition Standards state that all à la carte foods sold must have less than 35% of total calories from fat (except for nuts and seeds) and less than 10% of total calories from saturated fat. They must also have less than 35% added sugar by weight.

In addition there are specific standards for what is sold in vending machines. These standards also state when the vending machines can be available to students.

With regards to physical activity, the State Board of Education policy states that all students in grades K-8 should get at least 30 minutes of physical activity each school day. The guidelines prohibit taking away this time or using it as punishment.

In addition, a Federal Law states that all school districts must have a Local Wellness Policy. This Policy must address nutrition education, physical activity during school hours, and the foods and beverages available during school. Each district in North Carolina has had a Local Wellness Policy in place since the summer of 2006. However, they are being implemented and enforced to varying degrees.

It is important for our community to unite and ensure that our district's Local Wellness Policy is fully implemented, monitored and evaluated. It is our responsibility to make our children's schools healthy environments that nurture their bodies as well as their minds.

To do so, we need to look at what is addressed in our Wellness Policy. Is it enough? While the Federal Law states what must be in the wellness policy, we can strive for more. We can set standards for what foods are allowed at classroom and school-wide celebrations. We can determine that foods cannot be used as fundraising items or as rewards. Standards can be set for what is sold in school stores and in concession stands. We can also provide stricter guidelines for foods in vending machines. We can even provide guidelines for healthy foods packed in lunches and as snacks. The Policy can require more than 30 minutes of physical activity and can require activity for students in all grades.

However, we cannot simply demand the school system make these changes. We must support them at every step along the way. As a community, we need to get parents on board. We also need to help find local resources to support healthy fundraising and concessions. Ensuring the health of our children will take a cooperative effort.

And it's not just their health we are protecting. Children who receive good nutrition and get regular physical activity are more engaged in what they are learning, are better behaved and perform better on tests. Isn't it time we helped our children succeed in school, and in life?