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Ohio bill targets obesity in schools

By Peggy O'Farrell
pofarrell@enquirer.com

A bill introduced to Ohio legislators Tuesday makes schools the new battlefield in the war on childhood obesity.

The "Healthy Choices for Healthy Children" bill, introduced simultaneously in the Ohio House and Senate, aims to curb obesity by improving students' access to nutritious foods, making physical activity mandatory and tracking students' weight over a period of years.

"Kids spend six, seven hours a day at school. It's the No. 1 place they are outside their homes," said state Sen. Eric Kearney (D-North Avondale), a co-sponsor of the bill. "The easiest way to build good behaviors is by starting in schools."

A July report ranked Ohio 15th nationally for the number of overweight or obese children 10-17, with about a third of children and teens classified as too heavy.

The bill's authors say 27 states have set nutrition guidelines on food sold in vending machines and school stores, and 20 now require body mass index (BMI) screenings or other weight-related assessments for students.

The bill is endorsed by a coalition of health-care organizations, food industry associations and hospitals, including Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

If legislators approve the bill this session as it's now written, some of the components could take effect in the 2010-11 school year.

Components of the bill include:

- Requiring 30 minutes of moderate to rigorous physical activity daily, not including recess. According to the bill's authors, 55 percent of Ohio high school students don't meet those guidelines.
- Increases the physical education requirement for high school students from a half-unit to a full unit, effective with students entering ninth grade in the fall 2010. Thirty-five states now have mandatory PE requirements.
- Requires PE teachers to be certified and licensed as PE teachers, effective in 2013-14.
- Requires local districts and schools to include PE performance on their "report cards," and requires PE teachers to adhere to content standards set by the State Board of Education. The state board adopted guidelines in June.
- Allows schools to provide a free breakfast to all students who qualify for a free or reduced-price breakfast. Research shows that students who eat breakfast at school get better test scores, have fewer health problems and behave better in class.

- Requires schools to offer foods and beverages on a la carte menus and in vending machines that meet federal nutrition guidelines as closely as possible. Twenty-seven states set nutrition requirements for food sold in schools.
- Requires schools to measure students' body mass index when they enter school and again in third, fifth and ninth grades.
- Requires schools to educate parents about their child's BMI and associated health risks, and to post weight status information on local district and building report cards.

Lisa Simpson, director of the Child Policy Research Center at Cincinnati Children's, said Ohio is "behind many other states" when it comes to addressing childhood obesity.

"This legislation will help Ohio not only catch up but become a leader in school-based interventions against obesity," she said.

At Oyler School in Lower Price Hill, teachers and students are already following many of the guidelines set out in the bill, said principal Craig Hockenberry.

"I love this bill," Hockenberry said. "Childhood obesity is a big problem, especially for kids growing up in poverty."

Oyler houses students from pre-school through 12th grade. Lunch used to be the final period for high school students, Hockenberry said, and once students finished eating, they'd head home.

But school officials re-arranged the schedule, and now, high school students have a 20-minute block of recreational time.

School nurses already track students' BMI measurements, he said, and the school works with the Freestore Foodbank to make sure low-income students get healthy food that they can take home with them on weekends.

Additional Facts

For more information

To learn more about the bill, visit www.healthychoiceshealthychildren.org
