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Lawmakers Tout Broad Support For Childhood Obesity Bill To Require Exercise, School Nutrition, Body Fat Testing

A Senate panel took up a bipartisan bill Tuesday that seeks to combat childhood obesity by requiring students to exercise 30 minutes a day and mandating that schools adopt nutrition standards, implement body fat testing, and increase physical education requirements.

Primary co-sponsor [Sen. Kevin Coughlin](#) (R-Cuyahoga Falls), chairman of the Senate Health, Human Services & Aging Committee considering the legislation ([SB 210](#)), said the bill draws on a variety of ideas “and puts together a plan that we think is workable in the state of Ohio.”

By focusing on schools, where children spend a significant part of the day away from home, the state can have an impact on the growing epidemic of childhood obesity that is increasing diseases and health care costs, he said during sponsor testimony.

“I’m not the biggest government guy in the room,” he said. “I do think there’s a role for us to play though in promoting healthy lifestyles.”

The legislation would require K-12 students engage in 30 minutes of moderate to rigorous physical activity each day, excluding recess, and would increase the physical education requirement from a half unit to a full unit, Sen. Coughlin said. It would also require PE teachers be certified and licensed and would add a PE performance indicator on school district report cards.

In addition, he said the bill would: offer more nutritious food and beverage options in school vending machines and cafeterias; require Body Mass Index screenings in 3rd, 5th, and 9th grades; provide students’ BMI information and informational materials to parents; and create a council to determine further school-based anti-obesity policies.

While a broad coalition of business and health advocacy organizations urged support for the bill during a pre-hearing news conference and in

committee testimony, statewide school groups have not signed on.

Barbara Shaner, associate executive director of the Ohio Association of School Business Officials, said in an interview that she anticipated hearing concerns from her members about how the proposal would be funded and how districts would fit the new requirements into an already crowded school day.

Jennifer Economus, legislative specialist for the Ohio School Boards Association, said her group was also taking an interested party position and looked forward to addressing concerns with the bill’s sponsors and stakeholders.

Primary co-sponsor [Sen. Eric Kearney](#) (D-Cincinnati) told committee members that the failure to address childhood obesity at an early age would lead to health problems later in life.

“I know I am not the only parent who sits down weight their child at the dinner table and I find myself frustrated negotiating with a five-year-old to eat vegetables,” he said. “From the kitchen table to the cafeteria line, we need to take a thoughtful approach to how we eat and how active we are.”

Richard Stoff, president and CEO of the Ohio Business Roundtable, testified in support of the bill, saying it was inspired by the group’s intensive study of the state’s health care system.

“Today’s children could be the first generation of Ohioans to have shorter lives than their parents,” he said. The proposal includes achievable provisions that would help reduce the burden of disease and consequentially, the cost of health care in Ohio.

Dr. Steve Allen, CEO of Nationwide Children’s Hospital, said the growing epidemic of childhood obesity required a “multi-pronged approach to try to stem that tide.”

Children that are overweight at 10-years-old face an 80% chance of being overweight adults, he said.

Pediatrician Leona Cuttler, of the Department of Pediatrics Rainbow Babies and Children’s Hospital Case Western Reserve University, said one in three children, or a total of 500,000, are overweight or obese in Ohio.

“Our (obesity) rates our rising and they exceed national averages,” she said, noting Ohio was ranked the 15th fattest state for children and the 10th fattest state for adults, with 5.5 million adult Ohioans classified as overweight or obese.

Obese children are four times more likely to develop diabetes, and twice as likely to have asthma or develop mental health problems, she said. The pattern translates into higher health care costs.

Dr. Lisa Simpson, director of the Child Policy Research Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, said the legislation contained three main provisions that research has shown to reduce childhood obesity: it would get children moving, help them make better choices about food, and analyze their progress.

[Sen. Steve Buehrer](#) (R-Delta) said cheaper food tended to have a higher fat and calorie content and asked the witnesses how they recommend changing that fact.

Dr. Simpson said there was a national movement toward making fresh local food more affordable and accessible. In addition, federal subsidies for certain food production should be revised in the next farm bill, she added.

"Unfortunately, what I heard in your answer is that a lot more government interventions will have to take place," Sen. Buehrer said and asked why the bill didn't include restrictions on food labeling and marketing and "limiting how many hamburgers kids can eat."

Sen. Coughlin said he wouldn't support such measures, but there were many more acceptable ways to tackle the problem of childhood obesity.

"The purpose of the legislation is to identify where we can have an impact and where it's appropriate for us to do that," he said. "The components that have been identified are reasonable and workable and really will have an impact."

The measure was introduced Tuesday afternoon after the hearing and lists 14 co-sponsors from both parties, including Senate [President Bill Harris](#) (R-Ashland), [Rep. John Carney](#) (D-Columbus) and [Rep. Lynn Wachtmann](#) (R-Napoleon) introduced a companion bill ([HB 373](#)) in the House.

Obesity Study: Ten years from now obesity rates will reach 50.9% in Ohio and related health care costs will surpass \$16 billion for the entire state and \$1,800 per person, according to a [report issued Tuesday](#).

Last year nearly 34% of Ohioans were obese, says the report released by the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease, which was commissioned by UnitedHealth Foundation, Partnership for Prevention, and American Public Health Association. Ohio could save more than \$1,100 per person by maintaining the 2008 obesity rate.

"This study demonstrates that as policymakers seek to make health care more affordable, addressing the obesity epidemic is vital," PFCD Ex-

ecutive Director Ken Thorpe said in a statement. "It threatens to break the bank of our health care system, and family budgets, if we don't take action."

Obesity accounts for nearly 10% of what the U.S. spends on health care each year, the report said. Rising obesity is linked to one-third of the increase in domestic health spending since the mid-1980s.