



November 29, 2009

Legislation raises the question: Who needs to fix obesity problem?

By *KURT MOORE*
The Marion Star

MARION-Proposed state legislation that would make physical activity mandatory and track students' weight over a period of years is getting mixed reactions locally.

The "Healthy Choices for Healthy Children" bill, introduced simultaneously in the Ohio House and Senate on Tuesday, would require schools to provide 30 minutes of moderate to rigorous physical activity during the school day in grades K-12.

The physical education requirement for high school students would be increased from a half unit to a full unit, starting with students entering high school in 2010. Students' body mass index would be required to be screened in kindergarten, third, fifth and ninth grades.

The bill, which would also improve the nutritional value of food served in schools, is supported by the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children coalition. The coalition is a newly formed group of state leaders in business, health care, child advocacy, education, fitness and nutrition.

The group is led by Nationwide Children's Hospital CEO Dr. Steve Allen and Cleveland Clinic CEO Dr. Toby Cosgrove, co-chairs of the Ohio Business Roundtable Childhood Obesity Task Force, according to a news release distributed by PRNewswire.

"Childhood obesity is the most profound public health issue confronting Ohio," Dr. Allen stated in the release.

The bill is being proposed amidst a flurry of media reports concerning obesity, including a new study that estimates if obesity trends continue on their current path, more than 40 percent of adults in the United States will be obese by 2018.

The study estimates that about \$344 billion in annual medical-related expenses would go towards obesity by 2018, equaling about 21 percent of health-care spending. Ohio is one of six states where the report estimates that more than half of the population could be obese by then.

"Being the most overweight society we are, anything we do from an education viewpoint is vital," said Marion Harding High School health teacher John Godfrey. While questioning using the body-mass index, which he said can differ depending on how it's done, he said any such efforts are valuable.

Harding physical education teacher Jill Schlect said she gives students BMI screenings as part of a series of tests given to students who take gym.

"What we try to do is decrease fat percentage if they are high," she said.

Schlect also supported having high school students take a full unit of physical education, which she believes would be worked so that students take physical education for at least nine weeks every year

of high school. She questioned, however, why the state legislature within the last few years started allowing students to opt out of taking physical education if they take part in activities such as school sports or marching band.

"I'm trying to teach them why. They are getting physical education but they do not know why," said Schlect, who said she can explain to them how physical fitness helps their bodies.

Elgin Local Schools interim Superintendent Jim Craycraft had similar questions such as whether participating in club soccer, for which students do not get a school credit, would count for the physical education requirement. He said while marching band counted, flag corps did not.

"They are still figuring it out," said Craycraft.

Tiffany Wilson, a Harding cheerleader, suggested that having all students get a BMI test can help them be healthier and identify any health concerns they may have. Harding student Kyra Ross called it a good idea and said it would give students a goal to work towards as far as getting fit.

"It allows us to know what we should weigh," she said, suggesting it could also help spot problems such as anorexia.

Marion City Schools Superintendent James Barney questioned the proposed legislation, including why aggregate BMI screening information would be put on school report cards.

"We are burdening schools with fixing society's ills," he said. "To burden the schools with it I'm not sure is fair."

He said school districts would have to hire additional staff and provide more physical education along with classes in personal finance, anti-bullying and other mandates passed down by the state. Meanwhile they would also have to continue to work towards meeting state academic standards.

"It can be done but there are a lot of complicated pieces," he said.

Estelle Fark, who currently is teaching a class on nutrition and wellness, did not agree that it was the school's duty to take steps such as screening each child.

"I think we do enough in the schools," she said.

Reporter Kurt Moore: 740-375-5151 or kdmoore@marionstar.com. The Associated Press contributed to this story.
