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Companion bills designed to combat obesity in Ohio students

JACKIE NASH, Daily Reporter Staff Writer

Legislation recently was introduced into the Ohio General Assembly to help regulate the physical health of students in Ohio schools, and combat the nationwide childhood obesity epidemic.

Senate Bill 210 would establish standards for certain foods and beverages sold in public and chartered nonpublic schools, require public school students to have periodic body mass index measurements; require daily physical activity for public school students and make other changes regarding physical education, and establish the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children Council.

The Healthy Choices for Healthy Children legislation would build physical activity into the daily school routine by requiring 30 minutes of moderate activity; make physical education a key component to report cards; require BMI measurements for children in grades three, five and nine; and ensure that children have access to nutritious foods in school.

"Now is the time for Ohio to move forward with a comprehensive plan to address childhood obesity in our schools," said Sen. Eric Kearney, D-Cincinnati, one of SB 210's sponsors, in testimony before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. "Failure to address obesity at an early age will lead to life-long health issues and will come at an enormous expense."

Christina Phalen, a legislative aide for Kearney, said SB 210 was introduced after a 2008 study conducted by the Ohio Department of Health found that one in three Ohio kids is overweight or obese by age 8. The Ohio Family Health Survey 2008 also found that childhood obesity is a major public health threat that impacts every demographic group throughout the state.

"The statistics were really alarming about childhood obesity and many (Ohio) health groups, business groups and other groups came together to see what could be done, since Ohio was kind of lagging behind policy-wise," Phalen said.

After the 2008 study was released, more than 50 Ohio organizations came together to address the childhood obesity problem and form the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children Coalition, including the Ohio Business Roundtable, the American Heart Association, American Electric Power and United Way of Central Ohio.

A companion bill to SB 210 was introduced simultaneously in the House.

House Bill 373's sponsor, Rep. John Carney, D-Columbus, said he believes the bill would attack the issue of childhood obesity because it incorporates Ohio schools - settings that have an immediate impact on children.

"I think that obesity is probably the No. 1 preventable health-care issue facing Ohio and the country, and so, getting to children when they're young and instilling in them healthy habits is going to have one of the largest impacts on health-care costs over the long run," Carney said. "We know from empirical data that children who are healthier are not only able to lead more active lives, but achieve better results academically, as well."

He added that he believes the cost of the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children legislation would be very minimal.

The legislation calls for regulation of the fat and caloric content of cafeteria food, which should be budget neutral, and BMI calculations, which only require height and weight information and should not incur an additional expense, Carney said.

Additionally, physical activity enforcement should be at little or no cost to schools, he said.

"We are open to discussion for the physical activity requirements," Carney said, adding that schools could incorporate extra physical time into other class periods, so schools would not necessarily have to add teachers.

Phalen said that in forming the Healthy Choices for Healthy Children legislation, the legislators researched bills addressing childhood obesity in Arkansas and New York.

To ensure the bill addressed Ohio's specific situation, she added, the legislators consulted with several children's hospitals statewide, including the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, the Dayton Children's Medical Center, the Akron Children's Hospital and the Ohio Children's Hospital Association.

HB 373's first hearing took place on Nov. 18, in the House Health Committee. SB 210's first hearing took place Nov. 17, in the Senate Health, Human Services and Aging Committee.

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